

VOLUME V
No. 4



SUMMER,
1947

"What a chimera then is man! What a novelty! What a monster, what a chaos, what a contradiction, what a prodigy! . . ."—*Pascal*

CHIMERA

A LITERARY QUARTERLY

EDITORS

BARBARA HOWES

XIMENA DE ANGULO

Contents



Imperfect Myths: <i>José F. Montesinos</i>	2
Who'd Do It?: <i>Q. Patrick, Patrick Quentin, Jonathan Stagge</i>	12
Graham Greene: <i>Donat O'Donnell</i>	18
The Detective Story Mystery: <i>G. Robert Stange</i>	31
Notes on Primitive Modes of Detection: <i>Hector Hoppin</i>	39
A Trinity of 'Tecs: From There to Where?: <i>Ruthven Todd</i>	49
Requiescat: <i>Jacques Barzun</i>	59
Order and License: <i>Roger Caillois</i>	67
About the Contributors	79
Index to Volume V	80

Published quarterly at 265 West 111th Street, New York 14, N. Y.; 50 cents a copy, four numbers for \$2.00. Unsolicited manuscripts not returned unless accompanied by a stamped, self-addressed envelope.

Copyright 1947 by Barbara Howes
Printed by Van Vechten Press, Metuchen, New Jersey

Imperfect Myths

BEING AN OBSERVATION ON DETECTIVE STORIES BY A
CONTINENTAL READER

by José F. Montesinos



I

NOT MANY years ago, in most European countries, especially in countries in which, during the nineteenth century, the novel had been the most flourishing literary genre, the reading of detective stories was for people of literary discrimination an almost clandestine occupation. And when it was not, it was a form of sophistication, or snobbery in reverse, comparable only to those fads through which certain pieces of attire, or dishes or furniture suddenly become fashionable. There is always something ironic in such an acceptance of popular tastes—the irony of frivolous caprice asserting itself against all that is reasonable. Clandestinity and caprice are indications that the detective story was at once appealing and unsatisfying; it had become necessary to a great number of readers who were not at all uncultivated, nor merely naïve thrill-seekers, yet it did not belong to “literature,” to the literature these countries were so proud of. Though in France, Spain, Italy, and Germany there were already sophisticated men and women who were not ashamed of spending a couple of hours perusing a superficial and often badly written detective story, there was on the other hand in these countries no author of repute who would have stooped to writing such a story himself. He would have considered it as far beneath his dignity as writing a *roman feuilleton* or a Wild West story. English writers were the only exception, but in the

history of the modern novel England is an exception in every chapter.

It is amusing to note that the development of the mystery story into an accepted literary genre is a phenomenon very similar to the rise of the novel itself. Histories of literature do not tell—so seldom do they tell interesting things!—that up to the nineteenth century the novel was nowhere acknowledged—England excepted!—as a noble literary genre, that its sponsors were not the learned and supercilious critics, and that popular favor alone raised it to a new dignity. The ancients had known no novels, so the classicists felt bound to ignore them. They were only a means to air the gallantries of the courts; they were a product of social life, the satisfaction of petty salon-vanities, void of any profound sense, unable to carry any healthy moral message. Boileau had barred to them the way to Parnassus, which only the epic poet, the emulator of Ariosto or Tasso or Milton should dare to tread. Since the new age was no longer favorable to such golden visions, the poets' consciousness of their failure to live up to these noble and dignified models resulted in the ironic form of the heroic-comic poem of antiquity so much in favor during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The few novels of this era worthy of surviving the general damnation were regarded as a new form of comic epic—for example, *Don Quixote* and *Gil Blas*—and as comic epic Fielding himself justified his own works, in which the influence of Cervantes is so visible.

The novel, then, was not possible as long as literary life was the business of pedantic critics on the one hand, and on the other, a social game played by aristocratic ladies, petits-mâîtres and abbés. The novel such as we conceive it today, as a mirror of everyday life, became possible only when the "great public" gathered together was able to buy books and opened the way to big publishing enterprises, through which it imposed its tastes on the authors themselves. Sociological facts have been as important in the development of the modern novel as the purely creative tendencies of the poetic mind. Thus the history of the novel appears as a continual struggle between the happy few, striving to main-

tain high aesthetic standards, and the crowd of more naïve readers, desiring to be thrilled, to be amused, to be moved, to be amazed. A great many changing tendencies and fashions in the history of the novel are explained by these antagonistic forces. They will never, of course, explain genius, but they do serve to point out the conditions, the limits within which genius has its being. They explain the rise and fall of the adventurous, sentimental, romantic, naturalistic, detective, and psychological novel. These two forces coincide, or run parallel or run in different directions and neutralize themselves, and their frantic play makes up the external history of literary life. In it, the creative mind fluctuates like a weightless body driven to and fro by the waves and undercurrents of the inconstant sea.

II

Many phenomena in the rise of the novel present a striking similarity to trends which we can observe in the comparative history of painting and philosophy. In representing things, in drawing lines and shading colors, men strove through the ages for the utmost degree of likeness. The old anecdotes of Greek painters, which seemed to become true in the works of some realists of the Renaissance—Dürer for instance—show us that this tendency to stick to the truth of forms is deep-rooted in the human mind, as is also the opposite tendency to dream and to invent and to create shapes out of nothing.

The moment men had the means to copy things down to the last detail, they also began to invent devices to avoid complete accuracy of detail in order to arrive at a more poetic representation of those same things; the ability of the optician to make sharp lenses and the ingenuity of the artist in dimming them grew side by side.

Such shifts in point of view have occurred in the novel too, and we find them expressed in the fluctuating taste for realistic and non-realistic story-telling and in the varying moral and aesthetic justifications of fiction as such. The approach to reality and

the retreat from it have been as forcefully stressed in the novel as in the other arts, only here the order of the terms must be reversed, the stress must be laid on the imaginative element. (It seems plausible that in fiction the "fictive" should be primary.) In times of bigotry, when religious zealots wanted to do away with fiction, their argument against it was always: we ought not to waste in reading lies the time we need to secure our salvation. To the fanciful, irresponsible lying of the old chivalry-romances, early Renaissance critics voiced a different objection: why tell lies nobody can believe? But a more realistic art of lying could be dismissed on opposite grounds: why should we listen to lies that are common and sordid and vulgar and ugly? In these arguments down the centuries, realism has always had the worst of it. There has never been a realistic trend in the history of fiction which did not try to assert and justify itself on grounds utterly foreign to the aims of art—from the Spanish picaresque novel allegedly mirroring vice in order to make it execrable, down to the naturalistic novel supposedly intent on scientific documentation. When naturalism was on the decline and a new poetic spirit began to dawn, Wilde could with perfect truth define even this waning art as a decay of lying. The art of lying, the reaction against too obvious lies, the attempt to channel the lie into the limits of the plausible and likely, all this too—from one point of view—is an outline of the history of fiction: a continuous sharpening and dimming of the lenses we put up to things plus a tentative explanation of why we do so.

The positivism in vogue during the nineteenth century introduced specialization into the field of science, and it seems to have brought the same principle into the field of fiction. Genres and sub-genres of the novel came into being; nonetheless, these species were still closely enough related for occasional hybridizations to take place. An important branch of fiction appeared, however, which was more strictly segregated from the others and which had practitioners devoted exclusively to it who elaborated their own methods and their own techniques. This new form seemed impermeable—but as we shall see, it was not—to all literary in-

fluences and contaminations. It was always faithful in plots and staging to the most complete illusion of reality, yet always, apparently, indifferent to the scope, philosophic principles and self-justification of every form of realism, yes, often indifferent to its literary standards too. It was the detective story.

III

To Continental readers the detective story has always appeared as an invention and monopoly of Anglo-Saxon writers. Its history as far as it is known by the average reader is short and simple. Poe had the first intuition of its possibilities, Conan Doyle gave it its definitive shape and from this trunk spread, like limbs and boughs, the more recent developments. Actually, the history is not so simple, but there is no need to go into it here nor to search for other forerunners, to one of whom Conan Doyle was fair enough to refer by name: Gaboriau. Nobody reads Gaboriau any more, not even in France, and he scarcely deserves to be read. His stories were based on those *causes célèbres* so popular in France at the beginning of the nineteenth century, but he went further and conceived the role of the smart investigator able to deduce the solution of an intricate problem logically and unerringly from the known facts. However, the interest centered too exclusively on the *cause célèbre*. Poe on the other hand laid the stress on the problem as such, whereas Conan Doyle mythified, so to say, the deductive method, incarnating it in an appealing individual so improbably English that he imposed himself on the imagination of Continental readers with the luminous certainty of true life.

Conan Doyle's plots are often weak, and Sherlock Holmes' reasoning not always as sound as it might be, but, being endowed with the mysterious life of myths, the latter won for England the new empire of detective fiction. Because Sherlock Holmes was as he was, and because as such he was unthinkable on the Continent, the detective story remained a monopoly of England for a long time. In fact, this exoticism of its features—from the Con-

tinental point of view—even fostered its success. Even the most realistic novel offers the possibility of escape from this same reality we are used to; the more its fictive world gives the illusion of reality, the more ready we are to quit for it the real world we are living in. Truth is always relative; artistic truth is such as long as we can believe it. This English world of crime and detection seemed to be accurately described, and in it everything was possible. Thus the writer by his realistic craftsmanship made it possible for the reader eluding reality to create his own illusion.

Soon the writers—Conan Doyle himself had given the example—began to overdo the sense of righteousness inherent in the genre by endowing the detective with all possible virtues: he was as selfless, hardworking and charitable as he was clever. Sherlock Holmes was a misogynist. His successors were continent as only well-bred English gentlemen could be. Sir Galahad had taken over crime detection. In fact, something of the spirit of the old chivalry-romances began to pervade this apparently impermeable new structure. Irrational clan-morals and irrational sentimentality had taken their revenge on this creation of the abstractly reasoning mind. The growth of irrelevant, parasitic—and contradictory—matter in the detective story was an active agent of its success, but at the same time it was a peril to its artistic harmony and integrity. The development of sentimental elements in these novels was already a token of premature decay. As the perfect shaping of the actual problem into a perfect story represented the classic pattern of the genre, so the ineptly attempted hybridizations represented an inferior, baroque, form. In order to insure widespread success for their work, the less talented authors constructed impossible bridges to all kinds of inferior forms of fiction. Frequently, the old frame was unable to support this ponderous bulk of extraneous matter, and the heterogeneous compound fell apart.

We may pause here for a moment to consider some of the causes of the enormous appeal of the detective story. The primitive and classic pattern was intended to convey only the posing and solving of a criminal case by sheer force of deductive reason-

ing. Poe and Conan Doyle of course had methodological and technical hobbies of their own, but they coincided on this point. Since to solve criminal cases, and to solve them correctly and morally is also the aim of human justice, it is clear that the perusal of such novels appealed to the sense of justice of the readers. That the purpose of the whole work was to show the triumph of cold reasoning and that therefore the happy end was assured from the beginning, helped of course to flatter naïve popular tastes. No other stories require happy endings, but in detective stories they are a necessity.

Then, as in other kinds of realistic novels, the average reader has added to his store of information in reading detective stories. Realistic fiction is of interest for the history of modern civilization not so much because of the soundness and truth of its aesthetic principle—a discussion of this “reality” would have no end—as because of the infinite “realities” it made us acquainted with. The average reader has learned a multitude of things from detective stories; to begin with he has learned about everything connected with crime, and learned it painlessly—crime having been transformed into a pure problem and therefore having been sterilized and made innocuous. All that is gruesome and terrifying in real crime, all that is painful and distressing in violent death became tolerable when transposed to this other—nonetheless so real—world. By making out of death, pain and sorrow an object of intellectual speculation, detective stories enabled the readers to know these experiences without feeling them. There is no pity and no catharsis in detective stories, only a serene display of speculative reason at its utmost limit.

The detective, the supreme embodiment of human reason, became omniscient in the less likely stories; in the more sophisticated tales he was at the very least an accomplished specialist of something or other and the reader had the satisfaction of becoming acquainted with all sorts of esoteric lore. Everything that could thrill, amuse and amaze the reader was sought greedily by him, inasmuch as he could thus hope to rise to the level of the detective, see everything through his eyes, pick up clues with

him, live with him not the crime but the rapturous adventure of detection. I think that the growing popularity of all these detectives can be explained, like the popularity of almost all heroes in fiction, by the fact that the average man of our times sees in them the fulfillment on an enormous scale of his own ambitions: to be able to reason objectively, to be unemotional, to become master of the infinite things now at his disposal, to live life as a vertiginous adventure—and to live it safely.

The most popular stories, on the Continent at any rate, are those in which in addition to planted clues, much suspicion of innocents and errors of the official police, there is plenty of dizzy driving and flying: the mongrel forms resulting from the combining of detective and adventure fiction. A morbid taste for outlaws and underworld creatures has encumbered certain other forms with a vicious and at the same time equivocal fauna of bad men and women belonging originally to the second-rate *roman feuilleton* rather than to detective fiction. The best, however, remain those that go back to the classic pattern, that observe strictly the pure principle of logical detection and do not attempt to cross the path of other forms of fiction nor try to borrow the noble attire of “literary” novels.

The greatest difficulty in the way of the Continental detective story has been a stylistic one. The Anglo-Saxons, born storytellers, are direct and simple; Frenchmen are not, nor are the other writers of Latin descent. A different conception of beauty of style makes it difficult for them to tell a tale in which the ingenuity and subtlety resides in the plot itself and not in the expression. Simenon tried to endow the detective story with the technique of the “literary” novel, and he attracted a great deal of attention to his work in France and elsewhere; he showed, however, what limitations he ought not to transcend. By overdoing the staging of the plot, by painting too elaborate a background for his figures, the progress of the story is slowed down and the attention of the reader is divided between the criminal case and the alluring features of the surroundings.

In England detective stories were never the exclusive monop-

oly of specialists; even cultivators of the very high-brow novel—Huxley, for instance—did not disdain occasionally to bring forth a thriller. The best known specialists—Freeman Crofts, the Coles, Christie, etc., Dorothy Sayers in her earlier work—remained faithful to the classic pattern. This type of fiction grew there vertically, like a tree, without the ambition to conquer and to annex alien matters. The formula has proven fruitful in a sense: it was infinitely capable of applications even though always remaining the same; a universally valid *ne varietur* prescription. The ingenuity of the authors seemed as inexhaustible in inventing murderous plots and crooked devices, as it was in varying the nature of the detectives. Only these detectives no longer had the mythic life of Holmes—nor had their auxiliaries and Boswells the more subdued and unaggressive mythic life of Watson. This classic form, then, that asserted itself with the appeal of a myth, did not grow in the sense of the mythic creation. It grew only in subtlety. Too much subtlety is possible, as can be seen in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, in which the most improbable thing actually happens, just because it is so improbable. This virtuosity of the subtle seems to be a sign of the exhaustion of the classic formula, which is apparently susceptible of infinite repetitions but not of genuine variations.

I V

One of the greatest difficulties in building up a detective story lies in the necessity of not anticipating anything that could permit the reader to guess the final solution too quickly, though at the same time each character must be a potential murderer, and the actual murderer's actions must not look inconsistent when the last word is said. The necessity of not betraying him before the ending, in order to maintain the suspense, makes it impossible for the author to delve deeply into his character, which is explained only in a few words. To find better drawn criminal types we have to go to the great novels dealing with the psychological aspects of sin and expiation, in which actual detection is unimportant or altogether non-existent. The same could be said of the

psychological aspect of criminal motives, which mystery fiction always seeks in trite notions, in the provisions of the law and in the experience of policemen, coroners and prosecutors. It is a fact that stories of detection, intent on extracting mysteries, have neglected psychology. Not that very much can be said for the analytical studies of the so-called psychological novel; what I mean rather is the absence of that deep intuition of the individual soul that enables an author to make his hero as much alive as life itself. But it may be that the increasing interest of discriminating readers in certain types of detective fiction arises precisely from a growing weariness of the everlasting digging into one's own soul which characterizes the works of so many modern novelists. The disillusioned and weary European mind turns to something likely to extravert itself, to put itself in contact with things, things to be used, enjoyed and mastered.

Looking back to the evolution of the genre, we might be tempted to assume that it might, like the other types of fiction, after a long prehistory, grow up to be a new and fruitful form, capable of becoming, in new and more perfect avatars, an accomplished expression of the artistic will. This seems impossible. Crime does not sum up human life, crime is of little importance in human life, and this genre of novel is good only for describing crime and solving criminal cases. It can be cultivated, as it has been in England—either in an ironic or in an earnest fashion—by outstanding writers, but for them it will be only a pastime—as it was perhaps for Poe, along with other enjoyable exercises of mental strength such as solving cryptograms and puzzles. It cannot benefit from the artistic experiences gained in other fields nor can other types of fiction benefit from it. But it can become aware of its limits, it can elaborate its own *Poetics*, it can attain perfection—in itself, without trying to annex anything alien to it. And a perfect detective story, clever in plot, subtle in method, in which the protagonists live with the everlasting life of ancient myths, smoothly running, beautifully and simply written, will always be a wonderful thing.

Who'd Do It?

AN APOLOGIA FOR MYSTERY NOVELISTS

by Q. Patrick, Patrick Quentin, Jonathan Stagge



"I've read a few detective stories and I find them for the most part unbearably dull—the last thing I expected! It never seems to matter who kills whom; the horror and basic human emotion involved in murder seems not to be part of detective fiction. Why is that?"

—The Editor of *Chimera* to the Author.

THE EDITOR of *Chimera* read several detective stories and found them unbearably dull. This is a body blow since to entertain and excite the reader is the only justification for the detective story's existence. As the author of almost thirty mystery novels myself, my first instinct was to rise, bristling, to the defense of my trade. On reflection, however, I found to my dismay that I didn't bristle. It was even worse than that. The treasonable thought began to stir in me that perhaps the Editor of *Chimera* was right.

Perhaps most detective stories, including many of my own, are unbearably dull.

Having made this admission, I quickly tried to neutralize it by reminding myself that most published books in any field of letters are tedious. Nine out of ten "serious" novels are dull simply because they are bad. A large percentage of the work of many great creative minds—Wordsworth's, for example—is boring for the same reason—because it is bad. To admit that most detective stories were unbearably dull, I told myself, was not the same as admitting that all detective stories had, of necessity, to be unbearably dull.

Then I started to wonder again, and the even more treasonable

suspicion came that the Editor of *Chimera*, judging with the legitimate rigor of a literary critic, might find the so-called "classics" of detective fiction excessively tiresome also.

With my back against the wall, I decided that the time had come to anatomize this Regan of letters and see what breeds around her heart. Another sentence from the Editor's letter read: *The horror and basic human emotion involved in murder seems not to be part of detective fiction.* I tried to think of a detective story for which I could honestly claim that it had recreated the horror and emotional upheaval involved in murder. I couldn't think of one. And, from my own experience as an author, I thought I began to see why this was so.

It would have been easy to blame the authors and to say that none of us happened to have enough talent. But this is not the case. The fault lies in the form itself which is still in a clumsy, amphibious phase. One leg is established on the solid ground of literature, but the other is still stuck in that primeval ooze where the cross-word puzzle, the parlor game and the bridge problem flounder in brontosaurian indifference to "higher things." That even the most brilliant writers have been unable to pull this second leg out of the quagmire is due almost entirely to the public which continues to demand from them something essentially unliterary—the suppression of the murderer's identity until the final chapter.

Several authors, by jettisoning the element of Whodunit, have written excellent novels about murder. But this is beside the point. These novels, excellent or not, are not detective novels. The detective novelist still has to bow down before the altar of the Great God Whodunit. Like Chac-mool, the Mayan raingod, this deity is so insatiable for sacrifice that by the time enough blood has been drawn off for him there is very little left to pump through the moribund body of the novel itself.

To a superficial judge, we mystery novelists, more than any other authors, seem to be equipped with all the tools necessary to avoid unbearable dullness. We deal with murder which is one of the most exciting and colorful of human institutions. We should

be able to produce excitement as easily as a duck farm produces Long Island Ducklings. A closer study, however, reveals a very different picture.

In actual fact, we are perhaps the most shackled, hemmed-in and tool-less artists (if we can be called artists) in the world. If I indicate only a few of the paralyzing taboos imposed by the God Whodunit on us writers who try to "recreate the horror and basic human emotion involved in murder," I might well ring tears from a lump of basalt.

For example, it is unnecessary to point out that the most fascinating aspect of a murder is the history of the murderer's mind, the pressures, the aggravations, the warpings which slowly urge him on to commit his lonely act of shame. The Prime Taboo of the God Whodunit forbids any hint as to the identity of the murderer. We are, therefore, unable to enter our murderer's mind or, in any way, to show him in the process of growth toward his deed. The very essence of the fictional crime has to be concealed. This concealment, like a worm in the bud, does a great deal of feeding on our none-too-damask cheeks.

In real life, a murderer is a more or less rare phenomenon. It is reasonable to suppose that in any community there are not more than one or two people capable of perpetrating so unorthodox an act. But the Great God Whodunit not only demands that the identity of the actual murderer remain a secret. He also demands that every other important character in the book be presented as a potential murderer. To avoid dullness, a book which (to quote our editor again) tries to make the reader care "who kills whom," must offer characters who appear to breathe and feel as human beings. We mystery novelists have the unenviable task of making seem real a group of characters into whose thoughts we cannot penetrate, all of whom are capable of committing murder and all of whom have a specific motive for wanting to murder the same person.

One wonders what sort of play would have emerged if Shakespeare's first concern had been to keep his audience guessing whether Ophelia or Horatio or Guildenstern killed Hamlet's

father. One also tries to think of *Medea* with the children killed before the rising of the curtain and suspicion deftly shifting from Medea to Jason, from Jason to his girl-friend (whose name escapes me) and from her to Creon.

In real life, people who have not committed the local murder may gossip about it for a while or even be shocked or unhappy. But in due course they will return to their normal habit of acting like people who have *not* committed a murder. The Great God Whodunit, however, does not allow us mystery novelists to let this happen to our characters. Our characters are not only potential murderers with powerful motives for murders, they have also to act, throughout the book, in a suspicious manner. They have either to conceal evidence or creep furtively by night or lie about their antecedents or protect somebody or be discovered by the detective in a compromising place at a compromising time. These are the people whom we have to make real!

But perhaps the most dread of Whodunit's Commandments is The Commandment of the Surprise Ending. It is an essential of most mystery novels that the least likely person should have committed the murder. If, during the course of the book, one of us has been able, in spite of all obstacles, to give his characters some shadowy resemblance to reality, the Surprise Ending will surely expose them for the puppets they are. In fact, the more successful the author has been in making his people seem lifelike, the greater will be the reader's indignant disappointment when the Surprise Ending brings it *volte face*. That ageing spinster who was drawn with such subtle penetration as a potential mother-slayer turns out to be an irreproachable daughter, while the lovable old paleontologist who lived for his mesozoic trilobites is finally exposed as a gold-greedy maniac who slew his half-sister in order to redeem his stock market losses with her inheritance.

The lot, therefore, of the mystery novelist who tries to write a book with even a modest claim to serious consideration is not a happy one. Some of us would gladly change places with any smallish camel trying to get through the eye of a needle. Certainly, people of stern common sense would have given up the

unequal struggle long ago. But we mystery story writers are as pigheaded as we are, sometimes, perversely ingenious. We are ambitious too. We are no longer willing, as was the old-fashioned school typified by Mr. Freeman Wills Crofts, to admit that the detective story is nothing more than a mathematical problem to arouse curiosity. We want to ascend the literary ladder. Since the restrictions of our form make it impossible to rise by legitimate means, we have all of us, consciously or subconsciously, adopted some device for camouflaging the basic asthenia of our medium.

Some writers, like Dorothy Sayers and S. S. Van Dine, have garnished the old puzzle-salad with leaves plucked from the Encyclopedia Britannica in the hopes that learned disquisitions on the burial habits of the Mesopotamians or the Ancient Art of Bell Ringing will be mistaken for literature. Others, like Craig Rice, have made a virtue of the form's inherent unreality by laughing full in its face and romping in a frankly make-believe world where murder is as frivolous as a gin sling.

Some, like Carter Dickson, have wrapped a cerecloth around the old skeleton and tried to beguile their audience by whispering "Boo" in the dark. Others, like Erle Stanley Gardner, have made their stories move so quickly that the reader has no time to decide whether they are unbearably dull or not.

Some, like Leslie Ford, have attempted to make the improbable puzzle probable by lugging it into the homey, this-might-be-you milieu of suburban houses and supermarkets. Others, like Raymond Chandler, have gone to the other extreme and, by depicting only depraved, amoral characters capable of anything, have almost succeeded in making the "which-of-them's-guilty" cliché plausible.

These are only a few of the many crafty devices employed by us mystery novelists in an underhand attempt to disguise that second foot. But the foot, firmly stuck in the ooze, remains nude and antique, however elegantly we may bedeck and bedrape it. We are, of necessity, charlatans, and, if the Editor of *Chimera* sees through our antics, the Editor, I am afraid, is justified in re-

maining bored by us. . . . just as we would be bored by a painter who, with a subtle use of color and a preposterous ingenuity of line, tried to change a cross-word puzzle into a Mondrian.

To the hostile reader who asks: *If the going's so tough, why not secede from the worship of Whodunit and write books that have a chance to recreate the horror and the basic human emotion involved in murder*, I can only reply: *Oh, that 'twere possible*. Right now it is not possible. Perhaps this is due in part to our own eccentric loyalty to a cause well-nigh as lost as that of the Stuarts. But chiefly it is due to the public, the publishers and the critics.

The public still expects a novel about murder to be a Whodunit. The publishers still market a novel about murder as a Whodunit. The reviews still treat a novel about murder as a Whodunit, contemptuously relegating it to a ghetto-page of its own where it is handled, almost exclusively, by unsympathetic and incompetent critics.

The mystery novelist, however, does not expect or deserve pity. We are all of us, either for love or for necessity, riding a Hobby Horse. There are times when we experience a satisfaction as complete as that of Uncle Toby storming Namur on the bowling green. It is our own fault as well as our own misfortune if there are also moments when we feel that the motto of our guild should be changed from Whodunit? to—Who'd Do it?

Graham Greene

by Donat O'Donnell



"We've overdone civilization, and personally I'm all for a little barbarism."
—JOHN BUCHAN: *The Three Hostages*

"If this was civilization—the crowded, prosperous streets, the women trooping in for coffee at Buzzard's, the lady-in-waiting at King Edward's court, and the sinking, drowning child—he preferred barbarity, the bombed streets and the food queues."

—GRAHAM GREENE: *The Confidential Agent*

THE MAN that killed his father has always been a respected figure, from Thebes to the Western World. The impulse to disobey and to destroy, quite overt in young children, must assume secret forms in almost all adults, who realize the importance of not losing their jobs. Powerless before the immense and disciplining might of organized society, the individual, grown-up or not, can only preserve his existence by means of fantasy; the temporary emancipation of drink, the prolonged illusions of gambling, and the shadow-boxing revolt of the thriller, provide the only way out for most adults and adolescents in our industrial world, from which the consolations of religion have largely been withdrawn.

Reading a thriller is probably the nearest the average organized man ever comes to making a gesture of revolt. He enters the underworld—a closed world, like the islands and mountain-valleys of boys' adventure stories—and steps into the shoes of some successful gunman, whether a crook or a detective does not matter. He is isolated, strong, destructive, all that he is not in the world overhead.

It is at first sight surprising that so very accomplished a writer as Mr. Graham Greene should have devoted so very much energy

to catering to the ordinary man's desire for circuses with his bread. One is tempted to dismiss such novels as *A Gun for Sale*, *Stamboul Train* and *Confidential Agent* as pot-boilers (Mr. Greene deprecatingly calls them "entertainments") but this is not adequate. There is no difference in kind between *A Gun for Sale* and *Brighton Rock*, which has been described as his most ambitious novel; only a difference in the degree of seriousness with which the author treats his gangster theme. In fact, almost all Mr. Greene's works are thrillers, although some are suited for wider audiences than others. And one senses in them the very motives which make people read thrillers; hatred of organized society, longing for destruction.

At Mr. Greene's old school, of which his father was, with Freudian appropriateness, headmaster, there were no locks on the lavatories. The theme of lavatories recurs monotonously in all his work—they are sometimes a means of escape, sometimes a hiding-place, sometimes the scene of a crime—and so, much more significantly, does the theme of privacy. Mr. Greene's heroes live, very often, in bed-sitting rooms separated only by a thin partition from someone else's room, and are forced to hear various sordid noises, which the author describes with relish and disgust. Pinkie, the gangster-hero of *Brighton Rock*, brought a bitter hatred of life from the little slum room where he had been brought up, crowded together with his parents. Minty and Anthony in *England Made Me* are cruelly warped by the pressure of their schools. The boy Philip in *The Basement Room* extricated himself "from life, from love . . . with a merciless egoism" forever, because of a too-violent, incomprehensible intrusion of grown-up passions upon his childhood. The sense of broken privacy, of interfering society, is everywhere; Minty's "sacred pictures," shattered by his rowdy school-mates at Harrow, are its symbol.

The adult, the fully-conscious, Mr. Greene averted himself deliberately from the contemporary world—his aversion can even be seen in that odd photograph of him in the Penguin editions, posed diagonally, as if flinching from a blow. He joined (espec-

ially in his travel-books) in the contemporary denunciations of capitalist society, but rejected also Communism (*The Power and The Glory* and elsewhere), Nazism (*The Ministry of Fear*), Franco-feudalism (*The Confidential Agent*), sneered whenever the opportunity offered at Fabian Socialism, and did not appear to take much stock in Catholic Action either. The rejection of all conceivable forms of organized society could hardly be more complete. His approval was reserved for the barbaric world. Abyssinia, he wrote during the war for that country, was "dirty, but perhaps more worth preserving than the bright slick streamlined civilization which threatens it." In *Journey Without Maps* he wrote many similar things about the back-country in Liberia, to which he had gone in a deliberate retreat from civilization. In Mexico, he loved the primitive piety of the Indians and saw them as oppressed and intruded upon by a gang of politicians imitating contemporary European civilization.

Logically linked with this Rousseau-like nostalgia for savagery, and hatred of the bright, the slick and the streamlined, is Mr. Greene's delight in the symptoms of industrial decay, in the machinery that is still working but is no longer quite up to date. Thus, in *England Made Me*, England itself appears in a relatively barbarous light, seedy and home-like, compared with the up-to-date electrically-run monopolies of Sweden. "The grit of London lay under his eyes, he was at home in this swirl of smoke and steam, at the marble-top tables, chaffing in front of the beer-handles." And in *Confidential Agent* Mr. Greene holds up the action of his thriller for several pages, in order to describe in loving detail the scene of desolation in a depressed English mining area.

Many of Mr. Greene's contemporaries of the 'thirties, notably Mr. Auden, also dwelt on these phenomena with satisfaction, but for different motives. For them the ruined towns meant the breakdown of capitalism, the first step towards the classless society. For Mr. Greene they just meant a breakdown of machinery, a good in itself. This attitude had a respectable literary ancestry, deriving, like so much in modern English literature, from

a seldom-acknowledged master, Jules Laforgue. Laforgue, who shared the negative attitude to life of the symbolists, turned, unlike them, his eyes on to the decay of the industrial city:

C'est la saison, c'est la saison, la rouille envahit les masses
La rouille ronge en leurs spleens kilométriques
Les fils télégraphiques des grandes routes ou nul ne passe

C'est la toux dans les dortoirs du lycée qui rentre
C'est la tisane sans le foyer,
La phtisie pulmonaire attristant le quartier.
Et toute la misère des grands centres.

This is the mood which pervades all Mr. Greene's work, and which he expresses, less hauntingly but perhaps more appropriately than Laforgue did, with a whole museum of seedy imagery. And he tends towards the conclusion which Laforgue, in that strangely prophetic poem *Simple Agonie*, explicitly stated:

Que nul n'intercède
Ce ne sera jamais assez
Il n'y a qu'un remède
C'est de tout casser.

It was not, I think, in Laforgue himself that Mr. Greene found his crystallizing agent, but in one who had learned much from Laforgue, Mr. T. S. Eliot. *The Waste Land* appeared when Mr. Greene was at the very impressionable age of eighteen, and it seems to have influenced deeply both him and his contemporary, Mr. Waugh.

Mr. Greene was converted to Catholicism by a priest who had been an actor, in the grimy city of Nottingham, while he was working on a newspaper. He has recorded that he is "a Catholic with an intellectual if not an emotional belief in Catholic dogma." This, one feels, is only part of the truth, for Mr. Greene has undoubtedly certain emotional religious beliefs. He believes emotionally in evil, and he believes in hell. He seems, indeed, to believe in hell on earth; the phrase "Hell lay about them in their infancy" is one with which he seems to be pleased, for he uses it at least twice. He also believes, emotionally, in the dual nature of man, which he expresses in the symbol of the seagull: "half

vulture and half dove," and he tends to identify the flesh and the devil.

This system of religious emotions underlies all that is best and most sincere in Mr. Greene's work and it marks especially his three major novels, *It's a Battlefield*, *Brighton Rock* and *The Power and The Glory*. These novels all merit detailed discussion, but for the sake of clarity I shall limit my examination to the first two at present, leaving *The Power and The Glory*, which presents some special features, to a later stage in the argument.

It's a Battlefield (1934) is the only novel of Mr. Greene's that cannot with propriety be called a thriller. When it opens, its central figure, Jim Drover, a bus-driver and a Communist, has already been sentenced to death for murder. The story turns on the question of his reprieve. Mr. Greene spreads before us the vast complicated mesh of human motives in which Jim Drover's fate is involved: the devotion of his brother and his wife; the equivocal sub-Machiavellian calculations of both the Home Secretary (who is concerned more with the state of public opinion than with justice) and Drover's Communist comrades (who are disposed to feel that a martyr might come in handy); the sense of duty of the Commissioner of Police; the lusts and fears of many people, who, like the soldiers fighting in isolation under the darkened sun of Inkerman, have no idea of the effects of their actions on other lives. The two protagonists are opposed and similar; Conrad Drover, the sentenced man's brother, working doggedly under the impulse of love, thinking only of saving his brother; the Commissioner of Police working doggedly under the impulse of duty, shutting out all personal considerations from his mind. But we are very far from the straightforward Corneilian struggle between love and duty. In Mr. Greene's world, as in the world of the semi-Jansenist Racine, all is impure, and even in his "best" characters the virtues turn to corruption. The Commissioner's "duty" had made him burn villages, hang men, leave comrades to die. Conrad's "love" made him sleep with his brother's wife; both men are haunted by a sense of guilt, an uneasy intuition of the monstrous distortion of spiritual gifts by fallen

flesh. And these men, the lean yellow Commissioner and the thin melancholy Conrad, occupy the highest circle in Mr. Greene's terrestrial hell; below them, fallen deeper in the flesh, are the plump complacent Private Secretary and the plump sensual wealthy Communist, Mr. Surrogate. All are corrupt and their equivocal endeavours end in a mockery; Jim Drover, when he learns that his sentence has been commuted to life imprisonment, attempts to commit suicide.

Brighton Rock (1938) is a thriller with theological implications. Some seedy race-horse gangsters murder a man on Brighton pier by cramming down his throat a long piece of the hard sticky sweet known as "Brighton Rock" (an expedient characteristic of the peculiar, solitary-schoolboy quality of Mr. Greene's imagination). A woman, Ida, who happened to have "picked up" the victim shortly before, sets out to track down his murderers. The story is of her pursuit, and of the efforts of the adolescent gang-leader, Pinkie, to escape, and of the spiritual worlds they both inhabit. Ida is plump, sensual, self-assured; she likes Guinness and oysters and men; she dislikes crime and cruelty; she has firm ideas of "right" and "wrong"; she does not believe in Hell. Pinkie is a skinny slum youth, addicted to the use of vitriol and razor-blades, filled with hatred and contempt for women and for sex, convinced of the existence of hell both here and hereafter, and of his own damnation. The struggle between Pinkie and Idá ends, in a sense, in Ida's victory, for Ida is full of worldly strength; she represents the force of organized society, opposed to crime and ignorant of sin. But both literally and in a deeper sense Pinkie has the last word. The waitress, Rose, who has unconsciously betrayed him to Ida, is also a Catholic of the Brighton slums. She loves Pinkie and is willing to be damned with him; she receives spiritual consolation from a priest, who assures her that the dead Pinkie may be saved and (rather surprisingly in the circumstances) compares him at some length with the late Charles Péguy. Finally she goes off to play for the first time on the gramophone a record on which Pinkie had, at her beseeching, had his voice recorded in a machine at Brighton pier. The reader knows

that the words recorded were addressed to her and were words of cruel mockery.

In both *It's a Battlefield* and *Brighton Rock*, justice is done as society knows it, and in both novels we are left with a sense of the triumph of evil. Indeed in *Brighton Rock* we seem to see the joint triumph of evil and of faith; as if Mr. Greene were assuring us that only by recognizing the sovereignty of evil upon earth can we open our eyes to salvation. Pinkie's asceticism and his revolt against society are one thing: the recognition that evil and human flesh are inextricably entangled.

Mr. Walter Allen in an interesting essay on Mr. Greene's novels¹ lays justified stress on the dominance of the sense of evil in them, and applies the term Augustinism to Mr. Greene's attitude. It seems to me however that the use of theological terms in connection with creative writers is apt to be dangerously misleading. The emotional attitude perceptible in Mr. Greene's novels, the marked revulsion from the world and the flesh, is indeed found in the orthodox writings of the Fathers of the Church and especially in those of St. Augustine. It is also found in a stronger more intransigent and therefore more dramatic form in certain heresies, Manichaeism, Gnosticism, Catharism. The orthodox writings of the Fathers (and of course not all the writings of all the Fathers are accepted as orthodox) are carefully defined and limited in their scope. The doctrines of the heresiarchs on the contrary are (as they have been handed down) extreme and sweeping. And as art, under its emotional dominant, tends towards exaggeration rather than towards legalistic nicety, so art, when expressing spiritual things, in words, tends to resemble heresy. The "Catholic novelist," like the heretic, seizes, emphasizes, extrapolates a single aspect of truth.

If that is clear I shall not be misunderstood (as accusing Mr. Greene personally of heresy) when I say that if we must use theological adjectives it would be more relevant to describe his work as Manichaean than as Augustinian. A disciple of Mr. Greene, a man impressed by the "philosophy" of *Brighton Rock*

¹ *Penguin New Writing*. July-September, 1943.

would not, I feel, be quick to reject the following propositions: "*The earth is a place of punishment, the only hell that exists for the human soul. . . . Man is a living contradiction. . . . The extinction of bodily life on the largest scale compatible with human existence is a perfect aim.*" And these do not form part of the Catholic teaching of St. Augustine, but are the main principles (as summarized in the *Catholic Encyclopedia*) of the neo-Manichaean heresy of the Albigensians—"Principles that led directly not only to the ruin of Christianity but to the very extinction of the human race. . . ."

It is not at all surprising that such principles should have reappeared in our time, for never has the extinction of the human race appeared so practicable. It is not surprising either that they should have taken shape in "thrillers," for, as I have argued, the thriller is the vehicle for the ordinary man's unconscious desire to destroy the society in which he lives. Far more than the left-wing militancy of such poets as Auden and Spender and such novelists as Malraux and Silone, the thrillers of Mr. Greene reflect the state of the West European mind in the 'thirties.² Few would have accepted the dogma which Mr. Greene, as a man, had accepted: many shared the emotional attitude which Mr. Greene, as a novelist, was propagating. It was an evil time and he spoke of evil; it was a hopeless time and he held out a hope that seemed worse than despair. Men consciously desired to hold back, to move back from the war that was coming; and he too seemed to be looking back, to times of faith and primitive simplicity. Men unconsciously desired to smash and destroy the world that imprisoned them; he showed that world as ready for destruction, and he showed the violence that would destroy it. Although he did not want war he was preparing some men's minds for war, just as the Albigensians held it sinful to take any life, although they regarded all bodily life as evil.

² Mr. Greene must still be classed as belonging to that period. He has written nothing since 1940 except a second-rate thriller, *The Ministry of Fear*, and a pedestrian little book on British dramatists.

It is not only through its anarchic destructive undercurrents, (and the fact that they remain undercurrents)³ that Mr. Greene's work is characteristic of the 'thirties. It is also characteristic in its wastefulness and its lack of care for the future. I suppose that Mr. Greene, who lived by writing, canalized his violent imaginings into the form of the thriller because there was a better market for thrillers than for other types of literature. If that is correct Mr. Greene's contemporaries were making the most wasteful possible use of his talents, just as they made the most wasteful possible use of most of their other resources. For Mr. Greene's great gifts and cosmic preoccupations might be capable of producing a work of lasting importance, but his medium is against him. He has written very good thrillers but he cannot, whatever friendly critics may claim, "elevate the thriller to the level of an art-form." The thriller, like its cousin the detective story, is a specialized degeneration of the novel and it is its specialization, not its degeneracy, that makes it impossible to elevate it into anything. Earlier types of "blood"—Renaissance tragedies, picaresque novels—were capable of elevation because of their very instability; the formula had not yet been found. But the modern reader of thrillers, unlike the seventeenth century groundling, both knows precisely what he wants and can make sure of getting it. The thriller must be fairly short and its plot must be complicated and yet easy to follow; there must be continual action, violence always potential and sometimes actual, tension developing up to the final cataclysm; the characters must be clear-cut and recognizable. Obviously this formula is tyrannical. The thriller-writer can make any sort of puppet he wishes but he cannot allow

³ The type of thriller which became popular during the war was quite explicit in its destructiveness and savagery. Mr. George Orwell, in one of his most stimulating essays, expresses surprise at the popularity in wartime—when real violence abounded—of tales of imaginary violence such as that very unpleasant work, J. H. Chase's *No Orchids for Miss Blandish* (1939). The apparent paradox disappears if, as I suggest, one regards the thriller craving as at bottom anarchic and individualistic. War, when it came, was very different from the unconscious dream of war. It represented not liberation, but greater discipline; society instead of collapsing became more tyrannical. Therefore the need for fictitious and private violence became intense and even, in some cases, pathological.

his puppet to take on life and develop and influence other lives and get in the way of the plot.

In Mr. Greene's case the effect of this creative frustration may be clearly seen, and that not only in his "entertainments." He can create a character, and does so most memorably; we never forget Minty in *England Made Me* or the mad old clergyman in *A Gun for Sale*; but his characters remain fixed; they do not move except in a purely spatial sense. Again, Mr. Greene's plot-construction is excellent, but that is a question of technique rather than of art. If you compare *A Gun for Sale* with the *Thirty-nine Steps* by the late John Buchan, who laid no claim to being an artist, you will find, as I have done, at least ten closely parallel situations, devised with the same purpose in mind, that of keeping up suspense. The thriller, in its structure, allows little scope for creative ability. For that reason and others, the creative urge of a thriller-writer tends to spend itself in "background" and decoration, just as a Victorian architect would embellish a railway-bridge with Gothic flourishes. Thus Sir Arthur Conan Doyle decorated the margins of his Sherlock Holmes tales with romantic designs (drugs, violins, etc.) and in our own time Miss Dorothy Sayers and a host of others mix "blood" and "culture" in varying proportions. The "culture" in their case is usually more conspicuous than relevant, and is only too clearly intended to impress the customers. It would be unjust to suspect so serious a writer as Mr. Greene of such intentions and yet his methods have had similar results. Where Miss Sayers will endeavour to give a thriller tone by a background of high society, Mr. Greene, more sophisticated, makes his thrillers seem more important than they are by giving them the sort of shabby background we are now inclined to associate with serious writing. I believe however that this result (by which the most puritanical anti-escapist could read a Greene thriller with a clear conscience) came not at all from any unworthy motive but from that creative frustration which affects thriller-writers. I am confirmed in this belief by the loving delight with which Mr. Greene overdoes his effects. Such images as "she had a morgue-like mouth" and "his toes protruded from

his dirty gym-shoes like slugs," and stage-props like the three-legged spider which Minty used to watch withering under a tooth-glass may seem a little farcical to the reader, but if they are disproportionate it may be because their creator has lavished upon them the love that could have been the genesis of a whole novel. And, of course, frustration apart, this kind of writing can become as a habit. There is something mechanical, like mass-production, in certain of Mr. Greene's stylistic tricks, and notably in his way of attaching his sordid images in triads, usually at the end of a sentence. This maddening habit might be exemplified, literally *ad nauseam* from any of his books, but it is enough to quote a few examples from one of the best and least thriller-like of them, *It's a Battlefield*: "the trodden shoe, the black children, the murmur of the gas;" "the hate and the pain and the sense of guilt," "the switchback, the giant racer, the lobster-tea," "the furtiveness of lust, the sombreness of religion, the gaiety of stolen cigarettes." This assembly-line for the witches cauldron moves endlessly through all his work, remorselessly clicking along with batches of fresh ingredients.

When all that is said, when it is admitted that Mr. Greene did not so much "elevate" the thriller as be pulled down by it, he still remains a very interesting and important figure, the most truly characteristic writer of the 'thirties in England, and the leading novelist of that time and place. He may yet be more than that, but that is all we are now justified in saying. His reputation rests at present on his three major novels. Two of these (*Brighton Rock* and *It's a Battlefield*) I have already discussed; it is enough to say here that both, although vivid and strongly imagined works, suffer, in different degrees, from the type-fixing and intricacy of action from which the thriller-writer can never wholly escape.⁴ *The Power and the Glory* (1940) Mr. Greene's last serious novel, and, as many think, his best, seemed in some ways to shake off the curse and to mark a real development. It

⁴ Also from occasional great clots of nonsense like the preposterous confession scene in *Brighton Rock*, which could be avoided by anyone except an intellectual English convert to Catholicism.

treats of a period of persecution in a tropical Mexican state; the atmosphere is, as usual, that of civil war; all priests, save one, have been driven out of the state, or have lapsed; the one who remains is a "whiskey-priest," but, sinful and drunken though he is, he carries on with his spiritual work and dies before a firing squad; we are left with the certainty that his life has not been in vain. The theme is a noble one, and Mr. Greene handles it with skill. There are many of the ingredients one expects; the slow pursuit, the violence, the gloomy, bony, ascetic killer (in this case a Communist lieutenant). But there is one thing new and it is this that makes *The Power and The Glory* so much more impressive than *Brighton Rock*. There is a complete and adult human being, the priest, who moves constantly, through various temptations, towards self-realization and martyrdom. Unfortunately it could be said with much truth that this character, the only one of Mr. Greene's creations who lives and grows, was not created by Mr. Greene at all but by M. Georges Bernanos in his *Journal d'un Curé de Campagne* (1936). The Country Priest lived in a very different environment and was subjected to trials of a different order, but basically he is the same character as Greene's jungle priest; humble, alcoholic, lucid, strong in faith, and despised by his flock. Mr. Greene has translated M. Bernanos' *Diary* into his own idiom, has dramatized it by putting the country priest into the jungle and hunting him. The translation is successful, the drama powerful and moving, and yet one cannot (once the comparison with Bernanos has suggested itself) regard *The Power and The Glory* as a very important novel, or even as holding much promise for the future. Mr. Walter Allen saw in it a great expansion of Mr. Greene's powers: the power to express goodness added to the imaginative comprehension of evil. Here I think the critic failed to distinguish between an original and a copy, between Mr. Greene's deep emotional attitude of disgust and aversion and his intellectual acceptance of hearsay about sanctity. In *The Power and The Glory*, M. Bernanos' stumbling saint moves through a universe of evil that is Mr. Greene's own; the cretinous treacherous half-caste with yellow

fangs and slug-like toes; the couple making love in the dark evil-smelling crowded jail; the priest's illegitimate daughter (herself for Mr. Greene a sort of embodied sin) who responds to his timid fatherly affection with horrible coquettishness. . . .

In hell there is no progress and writers who see earthly life as a sort of hell seem doomed to revolve about a fixed point. M. Mauriac had perfected over twenty years ago that "sulphurous light" which illumines with unextinguished and unincreased intensity his latest work. And Mr. Greene, whose hell is more emphatic than M. Mauriac's and mingles with a more dismal and sordid earthly scene than the Gironde, has even less possibilities of development. Hatred of the world and the flesh is not always dominant in M. Mauriac's work, any more than it was in the world of the Albigenian troubadours. Under the suns of Provence or in the vineyards round Bordeaux it is hard not to love life some of the time. Manichaeism, Jansenism, life-hatred, did not really form a consistent mental hell until a defiling form of industrialism spread over Europe and then began to decay. The type of school in which Mr. Greene was educated, and its peculiar sanitary regulations, derive from the fears of the masters of that industrial world in its Victorian heyday. When he grew up, he saw it in its decay and hated it and became inextricably entangled with it. He gave it the fictitious violence which it craved, and its exacting demands distorted his creative powers. He turned away from that world into Catholicism, and he took from Catholicism what that world had given him, a hatred of life.

He will, I think, be remembered not so much for any individual novel, for none is quite satisfactory, but for the shabby Inferno which his work as a whole imposes crudely but unforgettably upon our imagination. That Inferno, from which Mr. Greene himself as a writer cannot escape, is both historical and theological: the grime and grit of the Black Country, the crooked Public School boys, the frayed collars, soured virginity, soured spirituality, soured kindness, forming a material and spiritual landscape, the world of the Slump, as well as of the Fall.

The Detective Story Mystery

by G. Robert Stange



AMONG its modern devotees the detective story generates an atmosphere of compulsion and veneration. The hallowed proceedings of the Baker Street Irregulars, or the fervent apologies of the addicts imply that for them more is involved than a simple literary exercise. It appears that, through some displacement in our culture, the weighty mysteries that have been the burden of tragedy and the meaning of scripture have been loaded onto the slight and rigid structure of the detective novel. The stories of crime and detection have assumed a certain spurious hieratic function: they attempt to deal with central problems (or mysteries) and to assure their uneasy readers of a stable moral system and of meaning and order in the world.

But in this sacred task the only religion this literature can interpret is the religion of nineteenth century reason, and the only faiths it has to transmit are those synthetic ones that developed to confront an age of individualism and science.

The origins of the detective story show quite clearly what needs and influences brought it forth. It looked back for its method to the age of the *philosophes*; its form was given it by Poe in the 1840's, and it reached quantity production in the late nineteenth century. In the third chapter of Voltaire's *Zadig* there is a famous episode in which the hero defends himself in court by demonstrating how, through deduction from a few minute clues, he can describe a dog and a horse he has never seen. Somewhat before this there had been a story about *Les Trois Princes de Sarendip* who, by a similar exercise reasoned into existence a whole caravan of camels that had passed a short time before. All four of these early virtuosi sound like rough parodies of Dupin

and Holmes. But these little episodes are prime sources of the detective method because they strike that essential note of faith in human reason and its ability to accomplish miracles that underlies all the books from Poe on. This belief in reason and science is a precept of nineteenth century rationalism; and both T. H. Huxley and Cuvier later refer to the accomplishments of Zadig as an achievement in scientific method.

It took the contradictory talents of Poe to establish a paradigm. In three of his tales of ratiocination, "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," "The Mystery of Marie Roget," and "The Purloined Letter" (published between 1841 and 1844) the elements of environment, belief and method are fused into a literary convention. Poe's personal maladjustment and his quite special milieu helped to accomplish the blending of romanticism and "scientificism" which gives the detective tale its convincing air. All the important themes which go to establish the canon are enunciated here.

There were, of course, other elements and other creative forces that came to the making of the tradition. The published adventures of the French police agent, Vidocq, brought forth much emulation and excitement. The *feuilletons* displayed the rather crude talents of Emile Gaboriau. However, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle followed the precepts of Poe, and his fabulous success at the end of the century established the dominance of Poe's pattern.

New manners of life have brought numerous variations in style and form. The lonely operatives of Mr. Dashiell Hammett and Mr. Raymond Chandler have intrigued in surrealist cities that are as familiar as our waking dreams. Literary journeymen have built their stories around any source that seemed to offer ready money. But up to the present day, the form that Poe set has represented the main line in the development of the detective novel, and for purposes of analysis it should not be too limiting to confine discussion to that majority of stories that has followed his tradition.

Poe shows very clearly what factors of environment and opin-

ion produced the standard motifs and what needs and uncertainties the detective story attempts to allay.

His stories take place against the background of the city, and since his time the detective story has been overwhelmingly urban. G. K. Chesterton has gone so far as to say that it was the first literary form to exploit the poetry of modern life; he calls it "the Iliad of the metropolis." However exaggerated, this statement does service in emphasizing that pattern of chartered streets which underlies so many rituals of crime and pursuit. The detective story writer, of course, would find in the great cities a made-to-order scene for crime, and an atmosphere of wonderful complexity; but the genre has another more vital connection with metropolitan life—it comes to act as an anodyne to the mental strains of the city.

The huge mercantile and industrial centers had their greatest growth in the middle of the nineteenth century, and their inhabitants made up the new reading public. The clear moral pattern that had been furnished by the institutionalized family and by rural living was giving way to the uncertainties of urban life. The former allegiance had been to primary social groups—the family and village organization—that provided ancient, established codes of conduct. The new allegiances were to those secondary groups, the workshop and the shifting neighborhood, which offered no settled base of any kind. The detective story emerges from this atmosphere of uncertainty, reflecting a system of morals that corresponds to the problems of the modern city. Its plot is calculated to reassure. It points out that there is an urban ethic also which is firm and undeviating. The city with its complexities and dark recesses might offer shelter to the criminal, but the stories show us how, again and again, the reasoning mind of man tracks him down and brings him to justice. The urbane ratiocination of the detective thus takes the place of the ethical guidance of the old squire, and the apprehensive citizen learns that there is indeed order and justice underneath the crime and confusion. The wicked are being put down and the righteous elevated.

This concentration on metropolitan background is one of the features that has limited the growth of the detective story to three countries—only Great Britain, France and the United States have produced the form. These are the three countries that enjoyed the greatest development of capitalism, the greatest urbanization and the greatest shift in modes of social organization during the last century. They have probably offered the most fertile ground because they sustain a respect for legalism which gives meaning to the stories, and because the disorientation of values has made their people receptive to this sort of consolation.

The great capitalist nations have also provided the belief in individualism which is needed to give full nourishment to Auguste Dupin, Sherlock Holmes and their innumerable descendants. One of the prime features of the ethos of the detective novel is its insistence on self help and individual initiative. With his prototype, Dupin, Poe established the routine of the amateur investigator who invariably succeeds where the stupid police fail—a routine which has been universally popular ever since. The attraction of the convention undoubtedly lies in the fact that it affirms the power of the unaided individual to bring justice and order out of chaos and crime.

As a free agent, the amateur sleuth decides at the outset whether or not he wishes to investigate the crime, and after having provided the solution he is usually free to judge whether the criminal should be handed over to the police or dealt with according to a private system of justice. There are scores of examples where we find the detective meting out punishment without reference to any authority more exalted than his own sense of right and wrong. In situations of this kind it is apparent that the detective is developing into something bigger than life. He acts with absolute freedom, delivering the law and providing retribution. He has been endowed with functions that in earlier literature were reserved for the gods.

At this particular point the detective story offers an interesting contrast to classical tragedy. In the tragic drama nemesis overtook the wrong-doer, and by bringing him to justice reasserted

the permanence of the ethical system. Behind the whole drama lay a background of generally shared belief which gave it strength and solidity. The crime effected a temporary disruption in the order of things, but eventually the system was reaffirmed. The detective story also deals with a tragic situation and its authors feel the need of making some affirmative statement. They are, however, limited to the materials at hand. The fragmentary beliefs of the nineteenth century cluster around the promises of individualism, science and reason. The detective story can embody only these faiths, and it therefore emerges as a pale, shaky substitute for tragedy. The divine functions of nemesis are now assigned to a human being—a self-made man who performs his holy duties according to the accepted principles of scientific rationalism.

This figure who has had thrust upon him the prerogatives of divinity must have the accoutrements of his role. The creators of the detective story have been very cunning in endowing their heroes with the convincingly unreal attributes that fulfill the reader's dreamy wish and quicken his devotion.

Dupin's extraordinary abilities set the style. In "The Purloined Letter" Poe makes it quite clear that his sleuth is operating on a level higher than that of ordinary genius. He pays his respects to both science and romanticism by giving his detective the best abilities of both the mathematician and the poet. Holmes, Poirot, Nero Wolfe and Peter Wimsey follow the tradition Dupin established, and variations over the years have not been great. There is usually an air of singularity and lush asceticism; some are more exotic in their tastes than others, but all the most popular sleuths seem to fall outside the pale of ordinary life, and to become a source of wonder and concern to their fellow men. Mr. Raymond Chandler has brought the tradition up to date by outlining a fictional detective who must go all his predecessors one better. According to this writer, "He is the hero; he is everything. He must be a complete man and a common man and yet an unusual man. He must be . . . a man of honor."

There is a strong presumption, however, that somewhere in

the process of exaltation the detective has lost his humanity, and it is doubtful that he is even the hero of the detective story. In order to be a hero in the literary sense, the protagonist must be recognizable as a suffering human being, and one should be able to identify one's self with him. The fictional detective speaks for the gods and the fates and operates on his own unique level.

If there is to be any hero in the detective story it must be that all too human character who acts as straight man for his clever friend. Sometimes narrator, always factotum, he trails after the detective in a state of amiable confusion, assisting here and there and being rewarded at the last with a full (though patronizing) explanation. It is with him that the reader inevitably identifies himself: with Dr. Watson, rather than with the maladjusted and eccentric Holmes; with Archie rather than with the exotic Nero Wolfe. The story is often told from this character's point of view; his bewilderment gives it animation, and it is his eventual satisfaction that is desired.

The extent to which the generic Watson has usurped the functions of hero is melancholy testimony of the orientation of our literature. Like the greater heroes of the past, Dr. Watson may be presumed to reflect general beliefs as to the status of man in the world. It is, then, alarming to realize that he is an almost completely passive figure. A very complex world moves swiftly around him, and he scrambles to keep up with it. His sufferings are often a result only of perplexity, and his difficulties are resolved not through his own efforts but through the powers of his miraculous friend.

This average-man hero of the detective story is a compelling emblem of the insecurity that lies behind this whole literary pattern. Bewilderment is his key characteristic; he is helpless when confronted with the mysterious event, and can only refer it to the expert. Fortunately, the sleuth and unraveler who is the source of the magic and the law is both benevolent and near at hand.

Sacred literature, however, requires not only participants and creeds, but a ritual to unite them. There is no clear point at which formal literary structure becomes ritualistic, but when archetypal

patterns are endlessly repeated, the literary product more closely resembles a rite than a form. The themes on which the detective story are built appeal more to basic psychological fears and desires than to literary tastes. The ritual of crime, flight and pursuit is not unique in the detective story, but the form cannot be conceived of without it. The reader goes through the routine as if it were a ceremonial dance, and shows no signs of being wearied by it. It offers him a method of projecting his guilts so they will temporarily cease to plague him.

The accompaniment to the game of flight, pursuit and expiation is the simpler pattern of the mystery explained. The oppressive mystery is established and then dissipated, and the more horrible and profound the initial darkness, the more gleeful the delivery into the light. It is no wonder that these rituals should become more desired as the complexity and confusion of the real world increase. These particular rites are slanted toward the modern man who finds most things around him a little too difficult to explain. They provide soothing release that is more satisfactory than pure escape literature. The detective story is notoriously the opiate of the highly literate, probably because its rhythms have the power of lulling the reader even as they persuade him he is using his mind.

Rituals of this sort can be endlessly repeated without boring even the most sophisticated reader. By assisting in the ceremonial "solution" of the mystery he is treating in a token way with those real mysteries that never yield to his deduction. The magic formula demands that all the mysteries of the world be symbolically delivered over in a form in which they can be easily handled.

The need for this symbolic illumination increased as the anarchic social order of the nineteenth century confronted the individual with more and more unsolved problems. Since the 1880's the demand and the output of detective stories has grown fabulously. Latest estimates say that detective novels make up one-third of all the modern fiction that is read, and this may be too conservative a figure.

For anyone concerned with general literary health, this enormous increase is alarming. It is very difficult, though, to formulate criticisms of the detective story which strike at the center of the matter. There is a danger of dismissing the whole genre through literary snobbism, and it is not contributing much to weigh it against great literatures of the past and find it wanting. Analysis is chiefly difficult because the tradition of the detective story (however self-consciously literary its practitioners have tried to make it) puts it in the elusive category of popular literature. Like all popular literature that is still alive, it can only be seized on the level of sociology and religion, and can only be judged through the needs that produced it.

These genetic needs have to some extent discovered themselves. We can see that they call for an assured moral order with inevitable retribution for evil. They grasp for reassurance of the potency of the individual intelligence. In answer to these demands the detective story has enunciated a moral system which, at least, compares favorably with any other furnished by our present society. It has created a pantheon of gnostic mentalities who emphasize the eternal efficacy of reason and individualism. It only fails us when we look for some real meaning or awareness in its depths. It is then we find that the whole structure is a snare and a delusion.

The great evil of the detective story is that, like any narcotic, it gives its addicts no permanent satisfaction. Almost any valuable literature is able to make some coherent statement as to the meaning of the world. If there is a confusion of values, it tends to reflect the confusion honestly. The detective story works in the opposite way; the more profound the question, the more misleading is its answer. It gives a monstrous and unreal version of modern life and of human justice. Instead of awakening us to a heightened perception where we might deal honestly with the problems that disturb us, the detective story lulls us into an acceptance of its trumpery version of reality. It reduces the most profound human experiences to the commonplace. It revolves around the deep mystery of death, and asks only, "Who done it?"

Notes on Primitive Modes of Detection

by Hector Hoppin



THE FIRST detective story was written in 1841, by Poe. Before that time, literature, folklore, and mythology present isolated elements of detection, but never the combination of elements which we have come to regard as essential to detective fiction. As E. M. Wrong has already pointed out, one reason for this is to be found in a faulty law of evidence; "for detectives cannot flourish until the public has an idea of what constitutes proof, and while a common criminal procedure is arrest, torture, confession, and death."¹ Nevertheless, even the most primitive societies have practiced detection of a sort, basing their methods on principles of magic which to us seem absurd. Charges of absurdity and injustice can doubtless be made against the savage; but it is questionable whether we have advanced so far as to be justified in taking a vastly superior attitude towards him.

Until recently, man's relationship with the world around him was magical, rather than rational. In other words, he endowed Nature with his own psychology, with the result that concepts of cause and effect were largely based upon subjective truths. In remote times, for example, there is reason to believe that punishment was sometimes perceived before guilt. Psychologically, there may be nothing wrong with this order of events: a person develops a neurosis ("punishment"), and *then* we wonder what has happened ("what crime occurred") to cause it. This is essentially an inner process, and is usually recognized as such. But

¹ "Crime and Detection" in *The Art of the Mystery Story*, ed. Howard Haycraft. Simon & Schuster, N. Y., 1946.

not always. If an ancient savage found the body of his neighbor lying at the foot of a tree with his head knocked in, he could, on making this discovery, have interpreted it as evidence of punishment; which would have led him to subsequent speculation concerning the *victim's* offense. Then, noticing the tree, he might have come to the conclusion that his neighbor had broken some taboo connected with the plant, had plucked a sacred leaf, for example, and had suffered the consequences. And so the case was solved. This is not so far-fetched as it might sound. Just as a savage is capable of seeking a human agent when none, in fact, exists, so is he quite capable of ascribing events to the automatic action of taboo.² When taboo is broken, affliction sets in without regard for persons or ethics. The situation can be aptly compared to a man who tries to mend an electric light fixture. His intentions may be the best, but if he touches the wrong wires, he is due for a shock. Similarly, the plague which fell on Thebes led automatically to a search for the infraction of taboo which had occasioned it and Oedipus' unawareness of his guilt was no mitigating factor. Even now, whenever any great calamity occurs, someone is sure to ascribe it to a breach of tradition or an abandonment of former values, such as the Gold Standard, Free Trade, or the Religion of our Forefathers.

Primitive society ascribes all death to supernatural causes. When death or disaster is assumed to have been incurred through offense to gods or breaking of taboo (along the lines just described), there is little one can do beyond the observance of cleansing ceremonies, and the possible sacrifice of victims for good measure; a form of ceremonial repentance. But when death is ascribed to the magic of a human enemy, the beginnings of criminology appear. From our point of view, however, irrational procedure still rules. In the simplest case, where one man is seen to kill another, the ends of justice may be served by retaliating upon the nearest members of the murderer's tribe. But when both murderer and victim belong to the same community, it is necessary to discover and punish the actual culprit. For example, the case is

² For examples of this, see Sir J. G. Frazer, *Golden Bough*, 3rd ed., vol. iii, 135.

recorded of a man who intervened in a dispute between two other men, and got killed in the process.³ His death was not ascribed to violence (as we might assume), but to witchcraft; for the accused "murderess" was an old woman to whom the victim had recently refused some melon. This problem of "detection" was simple, since motive provided the essential clue. A more complicated case arises when a swimmer is seen to be attacked and drowned by a crocodile. Since crocodiles are held to be harmless creatures by this particular tribe, the primitive investigator must discover the identity of the magician who, in the form of a crocodile, so treacherously devoured his enemy. If the victim had no known enemies among the magicians of his acquaintance, the services of a witch doctor would probably be enlisted.

In most cases of real or imaginary murder, the witch doctor carries out what appears to be an investigation of clues, vaguely reminiscent of our own procedure. He carefully examines the body, looks for footprints, picks up hairs that might have fallen in the scuffle, and takes note of blood-stains and other unusual signs that might be present. From then on, however, his method differs widely from ours because it is based upon two principles which are no longer considered effective. On the one hand, the witch doctor will make use of sympathetic magic to punish or hamper the criminal in his flight; and on the other hand, he will seek the co-operation of the victim's soul in revealing the identity of the murderer. Assurance of ultimate justice is thus made doubly sure. The actual details of procedure naturally vary. Perhaps stakes are driven into the footprints left by the fleeing criminal; this will cause pains in his feet, and make him stumble. If he has been wounded and has left a trail of blood, the stains may be collected and boiled, with the result that their owner's blood will likewise boil, causing the wretched man to burst.

The savage makes use of various clues connected with the victim, believing them to be expressions of the dead man's spirit, which, if they can be rightly interpreted, will lead to an identifi-

³ Theodor Reik, *The Unknown Murderer*, Prentice-Hall, N. Y., 1945; pp. 100-101. An excellent essay on primitive and modern criminal psychology.

cation of the culprit. There are endless variations to the technique. Perhaps an insect has been seen to creep away from the body, or spittle has trickled from the corpse's mouth. Either clue can indicate the direction in which the murderer has fled. The insect, in this case, would be considered a form of external soul which the dead man manifests, and its role can equally well be played by a bird or animal witness. Corresponding beliefs and procedures have existed in civilized societies. Denunciation by the victim's bones, and accusations by bird, animal and plant are commonplace in folklore. That a corpse bleeds in the presence of its murderer is mentioned by Shakespeare, Chrétien de Troyes, and many other authors; and it was still considered a decisive test by the Faculty of Law at Marburg as late as the seventeenth century.⁴

In all these cases it is a token of the victim which denounces the culprit, either in the latter's absence, or else in his presence, as when all the members of the community assemble for the witch doctor's detective ceremonies. Any number of rites may take place under these circumstances, but the important thing to note is that the onlookers, (the suspects, if you like), often have to participate actively in the process of divination and detection. It is not only the witch doctor who handles the magic objects, but all the people who are present; and at this point a new method in crime detection appears. Because, as the witch doctor's attention naturally strays from the behavior of clues to the behavior of people handling those clues, we find that the magic objects no longer openly denounce the culprit, but cause him to betray himself. It is the beginning of trial by ordeal.

In course of time, both trial by ordeal and trial by denunciation tend to leave the personality of the victim outside of the picture. The soul of the murdered man becomes represented more and more symbolically, so that there is finally very little evidence to show that it was ever considered to be the active agent. Putting the matter briefly and schematically (and therefore not quite accurately), we may picture the evolution of primitive criminology

⁴ T. Reik, *The Unknown Murderer*, p. 112.

to be somewhat as follows. First, the victim's soul returns in the form of a living creature whose actions indicate the murderer. Later, the soul merely influences some inanimate possession of the dead man, so that when this possession is thrown in the air (for example) it will fall in such a way as to point to the culprit. Still later, an ancestral possession may take the place of the victim's personal token, and, instead of using the bones of the victim, the witch doctor may employ those of a departed chief or magician. To cut a long story short, as the dead chiefs and heroes attain the stature of divinities, the idea gradually evolves (an idea adopted by Christianity), that crimes are solved in Heaven. European civilization eventually adopted two principal methods for discovering the criminal—or rather, for enabling the Lord to point him out: trial by combat (corresponding somewhat to our civil suits) in which the innocent party, by divine intervention, overcame the guilty one; and trial by ordeal, in which God saved the innocent from harm and resolutely punished the wicked.⁵

Criminology, on the whole, emerged from magic (in America and Europe) toward the beginning of the last century. There was no sudden revolution, but merely an ever-growing acceptance of the scientific attitude which had hitherto been restricted to a few enlightened individuals.

Nevertheless, primitive modes of thought may still, surprisingly, show themselves, even in a modern court of law. The case of Oscar Slater is an excellent example; and since the facts have been fully reported, only the bare essentials are needed to illustrate the magic use of clues by up-to-date policemen.⁶ On December 21, 1908, in Glasgow, at seven in the evening, a man by the name of Adams heard sounds of violence coming from the apartment above him. He knew the place was occupied by an old

⁵ We retain a trace of the ordeal in our custom of swearing on the Bible: if we lie, Heaven will punish us.

⁶ For a complete account, see *Trial of Oscar Slater* in the series of "Notable Scottish Trials," ed. W. Roughead, Edinburgh and Glasgow, 1910. For a shorter account, and subsequent developments, see W. Roughead, *The Murderer's Companion*, N. Y., 1941.

lady who would be unlikely to cause the commotion which he heard; so he hurried upstairs, reaching her door just as the woman's maid returned from an errand. They both saw a stranger emerge from the apartment and go somewhat hurriedly down into the street. They did not look at him very closely, nor did they suspect any crime until they entered the dining-room and found the old lady's battered corpse. By then, the unknown man had disappeared. Only one object was missing: a diamond crescent brooch, for which the police instituted an immediate search. At the same time, they issued two descriptions of the murderer. Adams and Lambie, the pair who had seen him come from the apartment, described him as clean shaven, and wearing a light grey overcoat and a dark cloth cap. Mary Barrowman, who had seen him emerge from the house onto the street, said that he was clean shaven, had a twisted nose, and that he wore a rain coat and a tweed hat. No progress could be made for a few days, until the police learned that a certain man had recently tried to dispose of a pawn ticket for a brooch resembling the one they sought. But the man could not be arrested, since he had, that very evening, sailed to America on the *Lusitania*. Authorities on this side were promptly notified by cable to hold the suspect on arrival; and when Oscar Slater landed (for it was he), he was immediately seized. He was searched, and a pawn ticket for a diamond crescent brooch was found on him. It bore the ominous date of December 21, the day of the murder. But then came an amazing discovery: Slater had pledged the same brooch in the previous November, and again in the early part of December; and investigation finally revealed that it had never been in the possession of the murdered woman. The case against Slater should have ended there and then. However, he volunteered to return to Scotland, feeling sure that the matter could easily be cleared up, and also because he had a large black mustache (all witnesses agreed that the murderer was clean shaven) finally, he had a perfect alibi. He was mistaken in his optimism. By the time he returned to Glasgow, pictures of him had already appeared in the papers; so that when he was held up for identification, the witnesses had no

difficulty in picking him out from the group of plainclothes men who surrounded him. As for his alibi, that was easily settled. He had apparently been dining with his mistress at seven o'clock on the evening of the murder. A servant girl also testified to the truth of this. But, as the Lord Advocate was careful to point out, meals in a disreputable household are rarely on time, and the servant girl could not be trusted because she was presumable corrupted by the sinfulness around her. Slater was convicted, and sentenced to death, though he was later reprieved. Finally, in 1923, he was cleared of the charge.

One of the extraordinary things about this case is the way detection followed the primitive pattern, which means, speaking in psychological terms, a non-differentiation between inner psychic processes, and outer physical ones. In other words, if a primitive comes to associate two thoughts, he will feel that the objects to which those thoughts refer are also associated. The corpse of a Zulu is found, and an insect is seen to creep from the corpse in the direction of Nduma; therefore guilt of Nduma. An old woman is found murdered, and her brooch is missing. Oscar Slater owns a brooch similar to the old lady's; therefore guilt of Oscar Slater. Again, a wanted man is described; witnesses see a picture of Oscar Slater; therefore the wanted man must be Oscar Slater.

Fortunately, the Slater case was exceptional. Nowadays the science of criminology rarely falls into such a complete morass, though we are still capable of committing similar errors, as in the Sacco-Vanzetti affair.

But I want to turn now from a discussion of detection, and take up briefly the subject of detective fiction which most certainly has a hidden psychological content. Few people seem to be aware of this. For example, writers of detective fiction usually give three reasons to account for the popularity of their work. They say that it is escapist; that it is a form of puzzle (often compared to the cross-word); and that it is entertaining. None of these explanations touches the heart of the matter, which is to be found in certain unconscious identifications between the reader and the things he reads.

The most easily observed identification is always the one between the reader and the hero (or heroine). In the type of story we are discussing, the hero is, of course, the detective. As we read the story, we become, to a greater or lesser extent, the detective himself. We see through his eyes, share his problems, and participate in his adventures. We know that he will succeed, and that we, too, shall succeed in his triumph over evil. We also have the comforting knowledge that our emotions will not be involved to any great extent; for the problem is not *whether* the criminal will be caught (which is a moral issue, and a disturbing one) but *how* he will be caught which is intellectually titillating, and not at all disturbing). Superficially, detective fiction adopts the utilitarian assumption that we punish the criminal, not because we hate him, but to prevent crime. This is all very well as an abstract theory; but it overlooks the fact that, in practice, it is the individual criminal, and not crime in general, which arouses our emotions and interest. When we remember how the Lonergan murder crowded out the war news from our papers in 1943, we realize how man still looks for evil in a limited form, as though, by casting it upon a single individual, he could somehow succeed in mastering the Devil himself. To a certain extent, this is the magic function of detective fiction. The detective reassures us by tracking down the single evil agent, and by mastering him in the end; like a skilful doctor who isolates the deadly virus, and rids society of one more enemy.

A far less conscious identification is that between the reader and the criminal. This usually remains unconscious, first because we do not see eye to eye with murderers, and secondly because the murderer is, in fact, unknown to us until the last few pages. It is much easier to put one's self in the shoes of Raskolnikov (in *Crime and Punishment*) than it is to see one's self as the murderer in a detective story. And yet, as one is faced with the problems of the story, one often has occasion to ask, "how would *I* have committed that crime?" The reconstruction of a crime has become part of detective work, in real life as in fiction. It stands in complete contrast to the primitive method which is to "feel

into" the victim. The savage unconsciously projects his psyche onto the victim ("animates" him, if you like), and is thereby led to find the guilty man. We, on the other hand, try to put ourselves in the murderer's place. In taking over the detective functions of God, man also assumed the murderous ones of the Devil—which is more than he bargained for. As a matter of fact, the detective story allows authors and readers to indulge their most ingenious thoughts on murder and violence, without any interference from conscience.

The fact that we, the readers, are both the detective *and* the criminal means that we are identified with the story as a whole, and that the plot of the story gives rise to an analogous inner process. As the less conscious parts of our psyches are activated, we find that primitive rules of thought take over the ascendancy, and that we participate in the story along the lines of sympathetic magic. When a lady of the Huichol tribe of Mexico desires forgiveness from her god, she solemnly confesses the names of her lovers, and ties knots in a string; each knot representing one lover. Having completed her tally, she throws the string into the fire, and as the knots are consumed, so are her sins forgiven her. Similarly, as the detective leads us through a series of events, and finally disposes of our criminal, so does the moral side within us finally overcome our anti-social side. This is mildly satisfying but does not influence our personality, because the story is pitched on an intellectual level far removed from the faith of ritual and the terror and the pity of great tragedy. Aeschylus, Shakespeare, and Dostoevsky (to name only three) force us to participate in their stories with our whole being, an experience which can leave a lasting impression on our outlook. Great drama, in this way, can affect us as deeply as a religious service (from which, of course, it has evolved). Detective fiction on the other hand, is only intended as a superficial entertainment, and it would certainly not be that if it brought our inmost conflicts and aspirations up to consciousness.

We do repress the moral conflict which is latent in detective fiction, so that it never reaches conscious synthesis. Some people

have drawn attention to a peculiarity arising from this fact, namely that we take no pleasure in the actual arrest and punishment of the criminal in a detective story. And why should we? He is our own criminality, whom writers very often allow to commit suicide rather than stand trial; an intuition of our pious wish that he will now quit the stage without further effort on our part.

A Trinity of 'Tecs: from There to Where?

by Ruthven Todd



ANYONE WHO, for professional reasons or for amusement only, reads in or about the innumerable swarm of detective novels, quickly learns that, twist them how you may, fundamentally all detectives can be identified as belonging to one of three categories. Sometimes these may overlap, but there is almost always some characteristic to show to which one the unraveler of puzzles and the enemy of crime really belongs.

The first kind of detective is the professional; the man from Scotland Yard or Centre Street, who, wrapped cocoonwise in the red tape of his calling, still manages to get his man. Historically, this detective has the longest genealogy, being descended from the fictitious English or Scottish characters whose "memoirs" appeared in books like William Russell's *The Recollections of a Policeman* (New York, 1852; London, 1856) or James McGovern's *Brought to Bay: or, the Experiences of a City Detective* (Edinburgh, 1878). Probably the oldest established "professional" still in the business is INSPECTOR FRENCH, the leading character in the books of Freeman Wills Crofts; others are G. D. H. and Margaret I. Cole's SUPERINTENDENT HENRY WILSON, Ellery Queen's INSPECTOR RICHARD QUEEN (leavened, however, with the brilliance of his free-lance son), Ngaio Marsh's INSPECTOR RODERICK ALLEYN, Michael Innes' INSPECTOR JOHN APPLEBY and, crossing to France where the law is less handicapped by feelings of fair play towards the criminal, Georges Simenon's INSPECTOR MAIGRET. The trouble about the professional is that, of necessity, his routine is dull and his character is too often in accord with his daily dreary round.

The grandfather of the second class of detective is usually

stated to have been Edgar Allen Poe, with his *Tales* (New York, 1845). Certainly in C. AUGUSTE DUPIN we have the detective as "a character," but, although I believe it to be a grievous heresy, I rather regretfully find myself in agreement with Miss Laura Riding in considering Poe to be a grossly overrated writer all the way round. Further, looking back from today at the history of the detective story, I realise how easy it is to over-estimate the importance of one who happened to be a forerunner, merely because, to the historian's eye, he seems to fit snugly into the pattern, like a fragment from a mass-produced jigsaw puzzle which is of exactly the right shape, although it really belongs to another picture. Poe's historical importance has, I believe, been exaggerated. It is doubtful if he had any real influence upon the form until after it had been established by the publication of Conan Doyle's *A Study in Scarlet* (London, 1887).

Like the pre-Darwinian theory of the creation of man, SHERLOCK HOLMES was suddenly there, right in the middle of crime's Eden, in full possession of his tricks and quirks.

I think it can truthfully be said that almost all detectives who are not "professional" derive from the Holmes model. Always the great detective has his trade-marks to distinguish him from competitors: G. K. Chesterton's FATHER BROWN, with untidy umbrella and shovel hat, Rex Stout's NERO WOLFE, drinking bottled beer and cherishing his stomach and his orchids, John Dickson Carr's DR. GIDEON FELL, stomping about on two rubber-tipped sticks under a black sombrero (I am, incidentally, one of those who subscribe to the belief that Carter Dickson's SIR HENRY MERRIVALE and Dickson Carr's DR. FELL are the same man participating in a gargantuan case of dual-personality), R. Austin Freeman's DR. THORNDYKE, coldly analytical and unbelieving (first cousin to John Rhode's DR. PRIESTLEY), and Dorothy Sayers' LORD PETER WIMSEY, fancier of old books and the trite quotation; we can recognise them all at the very first glance. In an age where the machine-made has become the staple, we incline to overestimate the value of the eccentric, of the man who does not conform to type, merely because he is "differ-

ent"; these detectives are fairy-tale characters, moving in their own magic through an apparently normal and humdrum society.

Some modern writers have been clever enough to realise that it was possible to mix the "amateur" with the "professional." The most outstanding results of this cross-breeding are Ngaio Marsh's INSPECTOR ALLEYN, with INSPECTOR FRENCH and LORD PETER WIMSEY as his grandfathers (personally, although I'd rather have a bad English than a bad American detective story, the former being on the whole more competent, I find this mixture nauseating—I like my policeman to be the cop on the corner, not an authority on *Debrett* and the *Social Register*, and I'd rather find him reading a sporting sheet than the works of Roger Fry or Lewis Mumford), and Michael Innes' INSPECTOR APPLEBY, who is by J. M. Barrie out of a Scottish University and who knows his *Hamlet* a damned sight too well.

The third sort of detective is that usually described as "hard-boiled." Like those in the first class, he derived originally from real life. One of the earliest masters of the school, Dashiell Hammett, actually was a Pinkerton detective, and even published his memoirs (*Smart Set*, March 1923). These consist of epigrammatic notes, of which the following are characteristic: "A man whom I was shadowing went out into the country for a walk one Sunday afternoon and lost his bearings completely. I had to direct him back to the city"; "In 1917, in Washington, D. C., I met a young woman who did not remark that my work must be very interesting"; "The chief of police of a Southern city once gave me a description of a man, complete even to a mole on his neck, but neglected to mention that he had only one arm"; "Second only to *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* is *Raffles* in the affection of the daily press. The phrase 'gentleman crook' is used on the slightest provocation. A composite portrait of the gentry upon whom the newspapers have bestowed this title would show a laudanum-drinker, with a large rhinestone horseshoe aglow in the soiled bosom of his shirt below a bow tie, leering at his victim, and saying: 'Now don't get scared, lady, I ain't gonna crack you on the bean. I ain't a rough neck!'"

From the material he collected professionally Hammett created his detective stories, which are just as toughly written as Hemingway, while being considerably less sentimental (compare *The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber* with Hammett's *Dead Yellow Women*, 1925, republished in *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*, No. 42, 1947). As Raymond Chandler, *The Simple Art of Murder* (*Atlantic Monthly*, December 1944), says, "I doubt that Hammett had any deliberate artistic aims whatever; he was trying to make a living by writing something he had first-hand information about. He made some of it up; all writers do; but it had a basis in fact; it was made up out of real things."

Further, looking at the civilisation about him, Chandler, the best of Hammett's followers, whose native intelligence is evident in all his writings, declares that, "The realist in murder writes of a world in which gangsters can rule nations and almost rule cities, in which hotels and apartment houses and celebrated restaurants are owned by men who made their money out of brothels, in which a screen star can be the finger-man for a mob, and the nice man down the hall is a boss of the numbers racket; a world where a judge with a cellar full of bootleg liquor can send a man to jail for having a pint in his pocket, where the mayor of your town may have condoned murder as an instrument of money-making, where no man can walk down a dark street in safety because law and order are things we talk about but refrain from practising; a world where you may witness a hold-up in broad daylight and see who did it, but you will fade quickly back into the crowd rather than tell anyone, because the hold-up men may have friends with long guns, or the police may not like your testimony, and in any case the shyster for the defense will be allowed to abuse and vilify you in open court, before a jury of selected morons, without any but the most perfunctory interference from a political judge."

In this brutal, and to an Englishman, almost incredible world, the incidents of Hammett's *Red Harvest* (New York, 1929) become casual and everyday. Death is no tragedy but something which waits for each of us round the corner of the next block. The

standards are almost those of the Elizabethans, of a society which could accept and understand a play like Cyril Tourneur's *The Revenger's Tragedy*, where violence is the norm of human conduct and the tragedy is only tragical because of its inevitability.

This America was the world of Prohibition and of these almost legendary writers who, from about 1923 on, made the *Black Mask* a memorable paper (incidentally, it is strange that no publisher seems to have acquired a file of this paper and ransacked it to make volumes of first-class short stories and novelettes, for there is plenty to choose from, and only Hammett seems to have been resurrected, leaving writers like, for instance, Carroll John Daly and James Moynahan as rewards of the enquiring connoisseur).

Unfortunately, too many of the writers of the second half of the thirties thought that toughness was all. The amount of liquor consumed by some of their heroes would have sunk a hardened drinker of the Victorian era, like Mr. Pickwick, into a helpless stupor. Again, sex went out on a lovely spree, reaching its peak in books like Jonathan Latimer's *Solomon's Vineyard* (New York, 1938), where sadism achieved an ecstasy only equaled in the last novels of Sir Hugh Walpole.

In England, apart from the serious work of writers like Graham Greene, in *Brighton Rock*, (London, 1938), and Walter Allen, where the English variety of gangster was depicted with a realism that was terrifying, the American version of blood, sex and booze was happily accepted. In England, a gentleman whose many pseudonyms included that of James Hadley Chase turned out an incredible number of these imitation gangster-detective-tough-guy books, the best known of which is *No Orchids for Miss Blandish* (London, 1939). In 1940, the writer, by that time a Flight Lieutenant in the R. A. F., came into conflict with the police, following the publication of vast quantities of more than usually scabrous paper-backs. The title of one of these was, so far as I remember, *Lady Don't Turn Over* (London, 1940[?]) and, either in that or in another of the series, the humour lay in the efforts of a band of crooks to dispose of the nude body of a blonde

which accompanied them around like a sad stage-property (that the disposal of a body *can* be funny we know from the late Damon Runyon's film, *A Slight Case of Murder*).

Peter Cheney was, perhaps, the only one of the English imitators of the tough school who realised the necessity so clearly explained by Raymond Chandler: "But down these mean streets a man must go who is not himself mean, who is neither tarnished nor afraid. The detective in this kind of story must be such a man. He is the hero, he is everything. He must be a complete man and a common man and yet an unusual man. He must be, to use a rather weathered phrase, a man of honor, by instinct, by inevitability, without thought of it, and certainly without saying it. He must be the best man in his world and a good enough man for any world. I do not care much about his private life; he is neither a eunuch nor a satyr; I think he might seduce a duchess and I am quite sure he would not spoil a virgin; if he is a man of honor in one thing, he is that in all things. He is a relatively poor man, or he would not be a detective at all. He is a common man or he could not go among common people. He has a sense of character, or he would not know his job. He will take no man's money dishonestly and no man's insolence without a due and dispassionate revenge. He is a lonely man and his pride is that you will treat him as a proud man or be very sorry you ever saw him. He talks as the man of his age talks, that is with rude wit, a lively sense of the grotesque, a disgust for sham, and a contempt for pettiness. The story is his adventure in search of a hidden truth, and it would be no adventure if it did not happen to a man fit for adventure. He has a range of awareness that startles you, but it belongs to him by right, because it belongs to the world he lives in."

This uncommon moral attitude is shown in Chandler's own novels, *The Big Sleep* (New York, 1939), *Farewell, My Lovely* (New York, 1940), *The High Window* (New York, 1942), and *The Lady in the Lake* (New York, 1943), where his detective PHILIP MARLOWE is a modern Knight of the Round Table, hunting the Holy Grail of Truth; frail as other men are frail,

but sustained above them by the necessity of his quest. Although some such moral intention may appear in the books of the other writers in this genre, it can be stated that on the whole their books are books of sensation, rather than books of ideas—still less of ideals.

However, despite his faults, the tough detective rarely descends to the pits of inanity inhabited by the amateur: "This Philo Vance is in the Sherlock Holmes tradition and his conversational manner is that of a high-school girl who has been studying the foreign words and phrases in the back of her dictionary. He is a bore when he discusses art and philosophy, but when he switches to criminal psychology he is delightful. There is a theory that anyone who talks enough on any subject must, if only by chance, finally say something that is not altogether incorrect. Vance disproves this theory: he manages always, and usually ridiculously, to be wrong." (Dashiell Hammett's review of S. S. Van Dine, *The Benson Murder Case*, in the *Saturday Review of Literature*, January 15, 1927).

While it is doubtful whether any other successful detective has managed to be as purely and beautifully silly as PHILO VANCE, many others have had serious flaws in their make-up as characters in an ordinary world. One of the worst offenders in this respect has been Dorothy Sayers, whose choice of a peer as detective is pure snobbishness. In case anyone should doubt this, I have only to point to the marriage of her policeman, PARKER, to LORD PETER's sister; this is a simple example of mill-girl-to-duchess in reverse, and should be aimed at an audience which likes that sort of thing. I am sure that the readers of *Peg's Paper* and *True Life Romances*, stumbling upon Miss Sayers, must wallow with her in her wishful dreams.

To offset this appalling sentimental snobbishness, a legend has been nourished to perform a parrot trick of declaring that Miss Sayers writes beautiful English. This comfortable idea needed to be destroyed and the demolition was successfully carried out by Edmund Wilson in one of three articles (*New Yorker*, January 20, 1945), where he pointed out that "really, she does not write

very well; it is simply that she is more consciously literary than most of the other detective-story writers and . . . thus attracts attention in a field which is mostly on a sub-literary level." This is true, and needed to be said, but it cannot justify the whole of Edmund Wilson's attack upon the detective novel: in these articles he would seem to have traveled a long way from his position as the acute critic of *Axel's Castle* and *The Wound and the Bow*, to the point where he can take up his stance to launch a priggish attack upon the detective story for not being things it never claimed to be.

The case of Chesterton's FATHER BROWN deserves a special note. As a Catholic priest, BROWN has to operate within a framework which is just as restrictive as the official rules which hinder the police detective, but Chesterton made his priest credible by insisting that he was a man who knew how murders were done—because he himself was the murderer; adopting the position of the novelist in W. H. Auden's poem, who

must
Become the whole of boredom, subject to
Vulgar complaints like love, among the Just

Be just, among the Filthy filthy too,
And in his own weak person, if he can,
Must suffer dully all the wrongs of Man.

The pure puzzle and the adoring DR. WATSON (compare Rex Stout's ARCHIE GOODWIN with Austin Freeman's traditional DR. JERVIS) are slowly vanishing from the detective landscape. In their place we have the humourous detective novel, such as the works of Craig Rice in America, and Edmund Crispin in England. In his first novel, *The Case of the Gilded Fly* (London, 1944), the latter introduces the pleasing irrelevance of Julian Huxley's monkeys set before typewriters in an Oxford quad, with an anxious don waiting for them to produce Shakespeare's *Sonnets*. This sort of flippancy, that of the early Evelyn Waugh and Ronald Firbank, makes for easy and amusing reading, and need not interfere with the course of the story.

Another, and I think the major, development can be seen in the work of a writer like Julian Symons, whose first effort, *The Immaterial Murder Case* (London, 1945), is a conventionally light-hearted extravaganza. In his second book, *A Man Called Jones* (London, 1947), however, the story develops in another way; detection has become of less importance than the picture of man as victim—the victim of circumstances, of environment, or even of the mere accident of birth. The major influences in this change of direction, seen also in America in Cornell Woolrich's *The Bride Wore Black* (New York, 1940) and *The Black Angel* (New York, 1943) and Kenneth Fearing's *The Big Clock* (New York, 1946), are, in England, a combination of Dashiell Hammett (discovered, so far as I can recall, by Robert Graves and his friends in the *Black Mask*, long before the publication of *Red Harvest*) and Graham Greene, whose "entertainments" succeeded in introducing a seriousness into the thriller which heightened its appeal as entertainment.

The "great detective" has not vanished from the scene, nor is he likely to do so. But the best work is likely to deal with a detective working under some excessive pressure which is practically bound to make him a one-book figure. Some of the established writers have seen the value of the excessive tension created by an urgent necessity, and have attempted to make use of it, using, for instance, the theme of the already condemned man who must be saved within a set limit of time. One of the best twists of this sort is in Carter Dickson's *The Judas Window* (London, 1938) where the locked-room puzzle is given additional emotional impact by the milieu; the problem being worked out in the Old Bailey itself, with SIR HENRY MERRIVALE conducting the defense.

The professional police detective has been moribund for quite some time. He is not concerned with problems of humanity or morality—he is merely doing a job, and the reader, who is also a man tied down to some job, cannot be fired by a man who strikes no sparks. The "shamus," whose decisions are unrestricted by problems of law, so long as he fulfills his destiny as a crusader on behalf of a justice which is concerned also with humanity; or the in-

dividual, trapped by events and working his or her way out, seem to be the most likely characters to satisfy the requirements of the reader. The senior member of the trinity being on his deathbed, his abilities and better qualities have been passed on to the other two, for, despite the change of perspective, the suffering individual has become the "amateur," the "great detective," even though his actions are restricted to one book, and are not featured in a series.

NOTE: All the critical material quoted is printed by Howard Haycroft, *The Art of the Mystery Story* (New York, 1946); in the text I have given references to the original publications for the sake of the dates involved. Other books which I have found useful are *Murder for Pleasure*, *The Life and Times of the Detective Story*, Howard Haycroft (New York, 1941; London, 1942), and *The Detective Short Story*, *A Bibliography*, Ellery Queen (Boston, 1942).

Requiescat

by Jacques Barzun



IF YOU SAY "detective story," please do not go on to talk about Myth, the Chase, the collective Unconscious, the guilt feelings of modern populations, or the sadism of those for whom travel means a corpse in Chapter I. Nor must you attempt to accredit these subjects by waving a shiny 25-cent book in which the hero, impudently called a detective, is forever driving "in a heap" to an apartment on Carcinoma Boulevard, Los Angeles. I do not believe the action of a true detective story was ever laid in California. I doubt whether it can be done, despite the inherent probability of death by violence in those sun-kissed climes. For the detective story proper is a genre which has little to do with murder and no interest in the display of variegated lusts. It is a sweet and simple thing without psychiatric or social significance, and except in the minds of overheated critics no mystery attaches to its origin, purport, or recent death.

To be sure, you can if you like give the name of detection to any story that presents a secret, a pursuit, and the discovery of evil-doers. But at this rate *Ivanhoe* is a detective story because of the Black Knight, and so is *The Three Musketeers* by reason of the mystery that surrounds Milady. To say this is only to admit that in many sorts of novels suspense comes from withholding information and setting the heroes in search of it. There is even a larger sense in which every novel resolves itself into a game of cops and robbers. In this generality all distinctions are blurred. It is perhaps significant that discussions of detective fiction began to appear in quarterly magazines when the genre was losing its character by interbreeding with more familiar types, and thus

came within the ken of ordinary critics. They are hardly to blame: they arrived late and misunderstood what had gone before. Still, the genre is absolutely distinct and can be defined in the usual way, by giving genus and differentia: the detective story is a realistic novel turned inside out by scientific curiosity.

Scientific curiosity here means curiosity about material things and their behavior. In the ordinary tale, the world described is chiefly the world of human feeling and action. Physical objects are merely the setting, or occasionally the symbol, of character on display. In the traditional romance at Broadacres, we take for granted common doorknobs and plausible crockery. What we want to know is how Edwin sighs for Angelina and what the old baronet thinks about it. But in *Murder at Broadacres* it is people and motives that we take for granted while we develop a passionate interest in individual doorknobs and articles of furniture. Why? Because the baronet has been found staring dead into his whiskey and soda and Edwin's fingerprints are all over the decanter. From then on the physical world occupies the foreground of our thoughts, and human feeling takes second place.

But this inversion, though obvious enough, does not tell us the whole truth about the purport of detection. If not cautioned we are likely to think that murder is the great fact for the sake of which we are going to compare footprints and empty trash baskets. Not at all. The murder is a mere excuse, a standard pretext to justify our special quest: the discovery of how things behave. After all, every narrative relies for impetus on some First Cause, whether it be the virtue of the Holy Grail, the young lady's desire to get advantageously married, or the young man's determination to try life. And we concede that it is not this commonplace pretext but the happenings on the way that define the type and insure the quality of each particular tale.

Hence the modern critical theories which find in Detection a mirror of the age, an explanatory footnote to our sexual or international relations, are beside the point. These views are fallacious first because they ignore the right atmosphere and intent of detection and lump together widely different genres;

and second because they seek to interpret our century's state of mind without regard to historical truth. Where in time does the detective story proper belong? Born full-grown from the genius of Edgar Allan Poe, the first detective story was *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*, published in 1841.¹ It is harder to date the last true example of the form since it is possible that one or two are yet to be written. But it is safe to say that Dorothy Sayers is the last great worker in the tradition, and her declared farewell performance, *Busman's Honeymoon*, came out in 1937. This gives us a span of almost a century, during the latter half of which a unique form was exploited and exhausted.²

Its relatively rapid decline is not surprising, for its rules are strict and its substance, as we shall see, curiously limited. One thinks of other restricted genres, such as the medieval riddles or the Renaissance droll stories, which had their day and could scarcely be revived even by modernizing their trimmings. This incapacity suggests another radical difference marking off detection from its supposedly near neighbors, the mystery, spy, or gangster story. These overlapping genres have clustered around and occasionally borrowed from the detective story, but they remain distinct at the same time as they betray their ancient lineage under new costuming. All the novelty in the "murder stories" of, say, Raymond Chandler is only the difference between the wild west of 1860 and the wild west of 1940. The hero is still a noble lad of iron constitution with appearances against him—the Tough that dreams are made on,³ but instead of fighting Indians he fights

¹ Poe may have had a bare hint from Voltaire's *Zadig* (1748) where, incidentally, the hero's detective feats are clearly traced to his study of nature. It is very doubtful whether Balzac's short sketch *Etude de moeurs par les gants* (1830) fell under Poe's notice. Of course, Cuvier's reconstruction of extinct animals "from a single bone" was a popular cliché of the period and it obviously epitomizes the whole art of detection.

² Both Miss Sayers and Monsignor Ronald Knox have subscribed to the belief that the detective story should be presumed dead. Mrs. Agatha Christie has dissented. See *The Tablet* (London) January 1947, and also a correspondent in the *N. Y. Times Book Review* for February 16, 1947.

³ See Mr. Chandler's article, "The Simple Art of Murder," reprinted in Rex Stout's *Mystery Quarterly* for August, 1945.

cops and Armenian restaurateurs. As for the terror thriller, it comes in a straight line from the gothic novels of Horace Walpole, Monk Lewis, and Anne Radcliffe. The banging doors and distant shrieks now occur in the private sanatorium or the banker's villa, but the trapdoor is the same, and the maniac in the last chapter is sustained by the same inadequate motives. Clearly it won't do to say that the demand for these atrocities reflects the neurotic personality of our time: Walpole's *Castle of Otranto* was written in 1764 and the readers of its many imitations were pre-Everything-that's-the-matter-with-us.

The truth is that the gothic tale on the one hand and the cloak-and-dagger novel on the other, suffice to account for all that goes by the name of detective fiction—except detection itself. *The Three Musketeers* is at once a spy story, an “oppenheimer” of international intrigue, a story of mystery, and love, and low comedy, and faithful friendship, like its incredibly multiplied progeny on our 25-cent bookstalls. Our hero is still victorious with the odds three to one against him, though where his horse used to stumble now his carburetor floods; instead of a trusty Toledo blade, he has a wicked-looking Luger, impressive weapons both. Today the eighteenth century Newgate calendar speaks with an Irish or Italian accent, and the rackets have a chrome-plated look, like the dives where they are carried on, but the tricks are the same as in Defoe, Le Sage, Fielding, Scott and Dumas. We dare not boast, therefore, that we are more bloodthirsty, lascivious, and crime-struck than our fathers: we are about on a par with the Age of Enlightenment.

This should clear the air of false charges and mistaken classifications, leaving us to contemplate the single new fact with which we started. What is new since Walpole and Scott, what is strange, wonderful, and now, alas, passing into yesterday, is the Detective Story. The very statement of its intention tells us when and how it came to be, for it implies a philosophy and an intellectual passion, which we can hear in the narrator's voice. We recognize at once the belief in mind, the orderly life, and the science of matter of the nineteenth century. The scientist's bent coincides with the

detective's—a limitless and minute concern with the physical world—and in the nineteenth century both disciplines could still afford delight by extracting meanings from simple appearances.

Hence arises what I have called the right atmosphere of the detective story—the precise language, the attractive equipment, the bedside manner, and the habit of making distinctions, which together induce such comfortable feelings in the reader, such openness of vision and pride in his fellow man. As he turns the title page, flanked by a carefully drawn plan of Fittsgrave Manor (called a “rough sketch” on page 114) the reader feels none but limpid and elevated emotions. No supernatural hand is going to stir up his atavistic fears; the victim will be despatched in a quick and sanitary manner; grief—if any—will remain conventional and unobtrusive (“it will not last a day, it will not last a page”); and love will be either sensibly excluded or allowed to simmer in the background. By the author's skill our passions will be engaged in mightier issues, now familiar but still alluring: rigor mortis, the state of clocks and watches, the tracks in the lane, the butler who thought he heard a noise, the disappearance of the will, and the elucidation of the odd marks on the blotter.

The merit of a detective story depends on the originality, the abundance, and the art with which such elements are invented, interwoven, and weighed as agents of fate. “Art” can be used here advisedly, for as Miss Sayers has shown, the secret of mastery in writing detective fiction lies in the subtlest handling of the Jamesian “point of view.” Even the human beings in the tale must receive precisely that degree of elaboration which befits the occasion: they must be as real as chairs are in a common novel, but no more; while the clues, together with the detective's mind, must be as alive and dramatic as the soul of any heroine.

The required detachment from personal feeling indicates that the proper spice for detection is macabre humor. The great, and indeed lifelike combination of death and absurdity yields the grotesque, which has adorned the finest examples of the genre from Poe to Sayers. All other flourishes are forbidden. As Ronald Knox has said, “there must be no Chinamen” and *pace* S. S.

Van Dine, there must be no psychology—at least of the intuitive kind. The detective story is as strict a genre as French tragedy or *opera seria*, which may be why its enjoyment tends to be limited to connoisseurs.

It follows that after a certain time the spectacle was bound to end. The great devices would all be used, inverted, re-combined, and only repetition would be possible. This is the era we have now entered, and it is marked by unlucky efforts to galvanize the dead—by endowing the characters with independent interest, writing a “real novel”; by adding doses of horror or importing the stark bark of Ernest Hemingway. None of these has resuscitated the patient, and I suggest instead a review of his noble career, which means unearthing a great many forgotten merits. How many readers, for example, recognize the names of Dermot Morrah and T. L. Davidson, each the author of a single masterpiece? And the period between 1890 and 1920 in both England and America was richer than we remember in experiment, invention, and narrative skill.

From a study of the literature, moreover, certain canons could be established about the form in its narrower sense. It would become evident, I think, that the short story is the proper medium for detection: brevity removes the need for red herrings, makes acceptable the thinness of the characters, and prevents over-elaboration in the mechanics. For a different reason, and despite the triumphs of A. A. Milne and Anthony Armstrong, the play is a poor vehicle for detection. The audience sees either too little or too much and the excitement, to cross the footlights, must be too gross.

Finally, we should see that the term of life for the Idea of Detection was set by the very progress of the scientific outlook which gave it birth. Twentieth-century science goes beyond the revelation of objects; it deals, if not with a supernatural world of its own making, at least with a supersensible realm where we feel baffled and unhappy. If the furnishings in the dead man's room have to be taken to a laboratory for analysis, all we can do is wait and be bored by false alarms until “the report” comes in—which

is to say that the story has walked out the front door beyond our ken. Only one writer, R. Austin Freeman, managed to make his advanced analysis palatable by contriving dramatic results for it and combining them with solid observations open to the naked eye. Though I can be told what the serial number of the gun was before it was filed off, because the molecules below have taken the imprint, I do not want to know it. I want to know, rather, what Holmes had in mind during that tantalizing affair which was clinched by the distance to which the parsley had sunk into the butter.

Though we must look back, then, and not forward, we have no cause to repine. The detective story embodied a great moment in the intellectual adventure of the race. It gave us, we must never forget, the sole presentation of science as an object of humanistic contemplation. The important thing was not that we learned to know the symptoms of arsenic poisoning, much less the technique of the Marsh test, but that we learned to look upon the universe as a sensitive plate recording our passage and disclosing our thoughts. We also learned something from detection about a cherishable philosophic tradition and its home. I mean British empiricism. Though made incarnate in this country by Poe, the idea of detection belongs to Bacon and Hobbes, Locke and Newton, Berkeley and Hume, and the home of detection is England. A murder in England is even better than one in a barred-and-locked room: it offers both definiteness and doubt, like a "system" in physics. We know the conditions at point A and point C, and must dee-duce the conditions at point B. Where but in Victorian England could regular habits seem plausible and be generally respected? By comparison, the Continent is a jungle, and resort is to be had to the South of France only when the story closes: let the absconding solicitor jump off the Grande Corniche if he will. Personally, I have never found a single Continental story of supposed detection that was not fundamentally false or ludicrous. Arsène Lupin is fun and Simenon is a bore, but their "psychology" and *coups de théâtre* are equally detest-

able. Those who babble of French logic are free to ponder the fact.

For the play of mind in detection—I shall say it once again—is not chancy speculation about human character; it is the systematic consideration of things. “A feather,” says our mentor, “is composed of a central shaft, the proximal part of which is hollow and is called the quill. There are processes on each side. . . .” The pleasure we feel is that of recognizing the strange in the familiar and the familiar in the strange, a philosophic pleasure which is also profoundly literary and consciously civilized. It took Robinson Crusoe, perhaps, to make us feel it on a large scale, by focusing our emotions on his coat, his house, his canoe. It is clear that in the end he also made us share his strong feeling about footprints.

Order and License

THE AMBIGUITY OF THE DETECTIVE STORY¹

by Roger Caillois



IF THE detective story represented merely a mental exercise, its contents would be of little importance. It would suffice simply to have the necessary connection between the solution and the evidence. No matter what theme would be fitting. The solution of any mystery whatever would be pleasing provided the rules of the game were respected. If it were but a question of solving a puzzle, the reader would ask himself whether or not the explanation was ingenious or banal, strict or arbitrary, uselessly complicated or surprisingly economical. He would care little whether the situations were peaceful or bloody. But such is not the case. The devotee of the detective story clearly takes little interest in the progress of a strictly disinterested pursuit. Since simple reflection is always satisfied by having the mechanism of a miracle taken apart, without requiring that this miracle consist of an incomprehensible crime, it seems the detective story would be less popular if it were not forced to open with a corpse.

Thus these narratives with so premeditated a structure, with so fixed an organization, are indeed novels. They move us, they hold our attention, and make us look forward to a dénouement. We read them with our curiosity aroused, anxious to "know what is coming next." We are naturally concerned with answering a question, but this question must bring into play a human existence. By definition, the plot must make the intervention of the

¹ This is a section of *Le Roman Policier*. Editions des Lettres Françaises; SUR. Buenos Aires, 1941.

police necessary, that is, it must perforce rely on an unlawful act. But the public, however, will not allow itself to be interested in simply a thief, a swindler or an arsonist. It requires a murderer, a criminal who has killed and who risks the death penalty. If there is no murder at the beginning and if the executioner does not await the criminal at the end, a perfectly executed demonstration will not fail to disappoint the most abstract mind, which will be irritated that it has been occupied with a trifle. A real drama, a merciless duel between adversaries disposed to extreme means and obliged to resort to them, is needed. The shadow of death must be projected upon the cold combinations of logic.

But does this combat between the criminal and the detective accurately represent the struggle between Good and Evil? It seems that its intensity is more important than its moral meaning. It is difficult to think of the detective story as a sort of gigantic epic relating the thousand different episodes of the contest between two ethical principles. Chesterton however, hails it as the modern Iliad which Baudelaire had recognized in Balzac's *Human Comedy*. The detective pursuing the murderer in the labyrinth of the large city he would see as a hero more courageous than Achilles, more cunning than Ulysses. Hence each episode would figure as a detail in the immense fresco on which contemporary society is painted in bright colors, a theatre where crime and law are engaged in constantly recurring catastrophes.

Nothing is more evident than that the detective story specializes in the description of this inexhaustible conflict. But it must be admitted that it likes to stack the cards. Its murderers are not real criminals, nor its investigators real policemen: they both are, occasionally, under the pressure of circumstances or for want of something better to do, not at all by profession. At the very beginning, perhaps, we are in the grip of common criminals and professional policemen, but the division soon becomes blurred. The representative of order is replaced by the amateur detective who makes it appear ridiculous; the highwayman is succeeded by a malefactor, elegant in morals and dress, if not the redresser of wrongs, at least irreproachable in his intentions; but not very

law-abiding in practice. Such, for example, are the figures of Arsène Lupin, "gentleman-crook," Raffles, the "crook with good motives," Simon Templar, "the Saint." The resemblance is hardly accidental. Here we are dealing with fascinating and generous adventurers, who defend the weak and oppressed, and do little more in most cases than make up for the powerlessness of the law. They behave like authentic knights-errant, more sociable by nature, it is true, than those of other days. They shed no blood, move in society, are wholly charming and witty, and attractive to women. But for the same character to act and to discover, to ravel and unravel at the same time, would break the rules of the genre too openly. Even if the author places him opposite criminals so that he may work to unmask them, and places him in the presence of a mystery which his perspicacity must solve, this hero is poorly fitted to fulfill as he should the function of policeman. He does not have at his command a sufficient freedom of thought. Above all, he would not prove detached enough from the events. He is too concerned with escaping himself from the police and with preparing his own actions. Whence a fatal step toward the adventure story, removing this type of narrative farther from the detective novel properly speaking: we fall back on a story with disguises and pursuits. We are less concerned with the process of reasoning.

That is why the detective is frequently the more ambiguous of the characters. Besides, the guilty man is far from turning into a professional criminal: he is only a man reduced to a situation from which there is no escape and who suddenly puts a prodigious intelligence to the service of dark designs. But he no longer attracts our sympathies. He no longer occupies the center of the work. He leaves the center of the stage to the policeman, whose physiognomy is then modified in a very definite direction. In the beginning we witness the exploits of salaried officials, agents of the law. Corentin in Balzac, M. Lecoq in Gaboriau are nothing more than stool pigeons. But there rapidly emerges the private detective, more skillful, more independent and more sympathetic. For, in spite of everything, the intelligent but mysterious auxiliaries of the official police seem engaged in a profession not only

not respectable but distinctly infamous. They are looked upon almost as spies. Their superiors themselves seem to regard them only with reluctance. Basically, they despise them and regard them as performers of low deeds. As for the men themselves, they unquestionably bear this unmerited opprobrium with courage. They sense the injustice of the contempt felt by those who use them and those whose person and property they protect. They are conscious, however, of being part of a crooked world and would not venture into aristocratic drawing-rooms. They understand that "nice people" are not overly desirous of their company

On the other hand, the amateur detective is no less worldly than the "gentleman-crook." He has a great name, like Lord Peter, the hero of Dorothy Sayers, attends exhibitions of paintings, concerts, the most exclusive clubs like Van Dine's Philo Vance. The identification of a criminal is for him only an agreeable pastime. If he condescends to trouble himself with a case, it is to help the baffled police or to get a friend out of a scrape. In everything, he keeps his distance and manifests his cultivated taste. He is a virtuoso or a scholar, plays the violin, studies Etruscan mirrors or recites in order the pharaohs of the different dynasties. He is an engraver or an archeologist, distinguishes a true from a false Cézanne, and criticizes an English translation of Marcel Proust. He represents more and more the contemporary equivalent of the "honnête homme" of the seventeenth century, skeptical, likeable, cultivated and leisurely. More significant still is that he maintains a personal sense of values. He helps the police without accepting the natural prejudices of the latter nor upholding what they defend. His curiosity is aroused by the mentality of criminals, he admires as a connoisseur their Machiavelian schemes and enjoys unmasking them as a rival rather than as an earnest enemy. He loathes surrendering them to justice. At the last minute, he puts himself in league with them and gives them the chance to escape or commit suicide. If the police are indignant, he reminds them politely, but firmly, that he is a benevolent collaborator and that he does not share their point of view. Since Sherlock Holmes, the detective has been an esthete,

if not an anarchist; by no means a protector of morality and still less of law.

Sometimes however the investigator remains attached to the police department, like Commissioner Maigret of G. Simenon. But in this case, he shares in no way the state of mind of his colleagues. He is neither a manhunter nor a watchdog. Under a surly exterior he hides a compassionate heart. Often he betrays a secret sympathy for the criminal he arrests, a simply human sympathy, not an artistic and distant one like that of his rival, the distinguished amateur. He too interprets the regulations liberally and will give pity precedence over duty. One has the impression that an obscure necessity obliges these policemen to play their roles with reservations. One would think they protected law and virtue without conviction. On the whole, the detective turns out to be sceptical and indulgent. His is not only a liberal profession but a liberal attitude as well: he is a journalist like Rouletabille, a priest like Father Brown, a lawyer like Perry Mason. Sometimes a poor appearance and a puny physique conceal the power of his genius. In general, with respect to society, he often seems to occupy a borderline position, like the sorcerer or the devil in old tales who appears under the guise of a stranger, a go-between, a doctor, a traveling salesman or of a cripple, a one-eyed man, a lame or hunch-backed person. To a variable degree, the figure of the detective likewise contains an alarming element which is poorly assimilated by the social body.

Of all detective story characters, Erle Stanley Gardner's hero, from this point of view, deserves special attention. In fact, more than any other, Perry Mason represents a type: similar characters appear in works as characteristic and as vigorously original as *The Maltese Falcon* of Dashiell Hammett and *The Death of the Maestro* of Raoul Whitfield, authentic masterpieces of the American school of detective novels. They are ambitious and avid individuals, very demanding with respect to money and especially apt at getting around the law. When they must get a client out of a bad fix, they have no equal in manufacturing an alibi for him or for producing witnesses in his favor out of nowhere. They

demand exorbitant fees for such services, but, on the other hand, they can be counted on: they have an extremely solid sense of professional integrity.

They find themselves in a strange and difficult position: on one side, they clash with crooks determined to do anything to attain their ends; on the other, they must be on guard for the police who, even at the best, find their actions suspect and who, because of interests in local elections, are often linked with the people at whose instigation the crimes were committed. Thus the outlaw and the law side together. However cynical and greedy he may seem, the lawyer displays in these conditions a superior morality. He struggles unaided against a hostile world where, to crush him, crime joins with hypocrisy, established power with hired assassins, whom the influential men of the moment employ to carry out their foul deeds or to keep themselves from being apprehended. For the corrupt politicians he confronts are careful of their reputations and, hiding their villainy beneath edifying exteriors, pretend to be scrupulous. On the other hand, he allows himself to appear worse than he is, tough when he is sensitive, gross when he is fastidious, selfish when he is generous.

One must stress another peculiarity of this set of investigators. They are frequently helped in their investigations by a woman who is both secretary and mistress. Women until now do not seem to have existed for the detective, except as eventual criminals. He was deduction itself: to pay the slightest attention to feminine charm would have disqualified him immediately. Love seems so constantly banished from the whole of the narrative, and moreover, from the preoccupations of the hero, that there has even been drawn from this peculiarity a hypothesis as to the origin of the detective story; that is, that it was occasioned by the severity of morals in the Victorian era in England and by a tendency which then developed to create a literature without love, in which destructive passion played no part. This supposition seems not very probable: it is precisely when feelings are thwarted in reality that they take their revenge in the imagination, so that a prudish and well-behaved age may be expected rather to produce in

abundance pictures of violent passions and exaggerated romantic narratives. That era precisely seems better represented by George Eliot or the Brontë sisters than by Wilkie Collins. In fact, it is the abstract inevitability of the genre which has eliminated all love intrigue. Nothing must disturb either the thought or the thinker. Neither the heart nor the flesh must distract the brain. It is then strange that the investigation is suddenly confided to a couple whose professional relations are accompanied by sensual bonds. These bonds are in no sense vulgar and are precisely in line with the moral attitude assumed by the lawyer-detective. Just as he was ashamed of his respectability, he is embarrassed by his tenderness. He never has an affectionate word or gesture for his companion. Sometimes she seems to him a collaborator whom he congratulates or blames, as she warrants, sometimes she appears rather the "divertissement du guerrier," the welcoming arms where he finds rest from his fatigue, forgetfulness from his cares, and pleasure. Apparently they are united only by sex and business. In reality, their understanding goes much farther and reaches the deepest levels of sensibility. He bullies her somewhat, pretends she comes after his work, but only to hide her importance for him. She laughs good-naturedly at his mistakes or recalls him to modesty when he is overbearing, but the fact is that she is tired of admiring him so and does not want to seem to flatter him overtly. They have a horror of sentimentality, of ready-made phrases, of superfluous words: they prefer to remain quiet, exchanging only glances, even if one were led to believe they were not in love, and even this pleases them. Wanting nothing about themselves to be false, they have renounced the conventional trappings of love. Their taste for the authentic has led them to distrust true feelings, or at least their expression, by seeing them made manifest by others who have not experienced them. Perry Mason wants nothing so much as the esteem of Della Street and the latter has tears in her eyes for once having doubted his love. Likewise, the shyster lawyer who plays the detective in *The Death of the Maestro* curses over the phone and breaks a pencil in two when a drowsing officer makes him repeat that he

has just found his Irish secretary-mistress murdered. Then he locks himself in the room and stands motionless by the window. One would not have suspected this brutal fellow of such sensitivity.

The presence of such elements turns the detective story unquestionably away from its intellectual vocation. If it remains a demonstration, this demonstration is far too burdened with militant and suffering humanity, instead of being reduced to a theoretical study of formal possibilities. Life takes its revenge and revives the novel of manners in the midst of mathematic aridity. *The Maltese Falcon* was of interest because of merits other than those ordinarily found in the detective novel. But there remained at least a puzzle to solve, a criminal to track down. In other of Dashiell Hammett's works, this fundamental element disappears completely. We return to the novel pure and simple, disordered and immense, without inversion of time, nor logical construction, nor reconstitution of a past event. The narrative has in common with the detective story only the fact of evidently springing from it—by the exaggeration of its sensational aspect, by the role played by criminals and detectives, by the place occupied by violent deaths and premeditated murders. What was a pretext and a point of departure has become the essential. Once more emotion surpasses reflection. Abstract effort is lost in the portrayal of violence.

Once engaged on this path, the authors are not long in pursuing the most outworn sensation with as much insistence as they formerly presented the most disembodied dialectic. The narratives linger in complacently describing scabrous scenes of cruelty or eroticism. Indeed, the detective story was never completely indifferent to atmosphere. Sometimes it came in as an important factor in the problem. Pierre Véry's *Disparus de St. Agil* required a world where childish imagination reigned supreme; in Landon's *House of Horrors* in which each time a murder is committed, a piano in the dark plays by itself the "Devil's Sonata" of Tartini, it is indispensable for the plot to be bathed in an atmosphere of supernatural anxiety. It happens that the author takes pleasure in

describing the setting of his work, and changes its interest. Thus, there was absolutely no reason in *La Folle Hurle à La Mort* by Raymon Fauchet to proceed to so many frightful descriptions of liquefying corpses and decomposed viscera, which the hero receives square in the face and whose tenacious odor makes him vomit. The volume is completely filled with episodes of this type, which avoid monotony only by becoming increasingly repulsive.

One may be forced to admit in the preceding cases that recourse to terror and horror remains a means and not an end, that it remains a setting and defines the psychological universe where the drama took place. At the other extreme, a writer like Van Dine invariably chooses for his puzzles a world of disinterested erudition and pure science. Here and there, the background against which the characters move enters in as an irreplaceable clue which indicates to the detective the direction he must take, warning him that a certain crime is the work of a maniac or a sadist, another of an astronomer or a numismatist. The contrary is the case in American novels: in one of them, each time that the hero seems to be coming to, his keepers beat his swollen and bloody face until the poor man falls back unconscious. In another, a blind old man touches and smells his naked daughter to be sure she is not still burning and moist from a man's embrace. Such scenes, described at length, constitute each time the center of the work, an emotional peak, after which interest declines. They correspond to a heightening of interest in the order of sensation just as the impeccable deduction of the detective corresponds to a heightening of interest in the order of the intellect. They develop the violent and passionate element inherent in the criminal plot, just as the strict construction of a theory is the flowering of the other aspect of its nature and designate it clearly as the solving of a puzzle, the reduction of the incomprehensible, the deciphering of a cryptogram.

One sees now between what opposite extremes the detective story wavers and how it might please both the ambitions of the intelligence and the appetites of sensation, if it did not have to sacrifice one of the two tendencies to satisfy the other. However,

it must always of necessity contain the two elements: murder and investigation. Therefore it appeals to any public and fulfills the most diverse requirements of any reader. It combines the attractions of the story one follows passively and those of the search in which one takes an active part. It arouses all sorts of emotions and oddly enough the easiest to arouse, those which spring from elemental instincts, but at the same time it prompts the instinct which dominates and unifies. It charms, captivates, refreshes, by giving the impression of progress, of rewarded effort, of fruitful work.

In a study published some time ago devoted to the *Archives du Club des Onze* of André Salmon, a sort of poetic fantasy faintly resembling a detective story, Pierre Véry is quite right in identifying the unseizable criminal Fantômas with sensation and the indefatigable Inspector Juve with investigation: we understand, therefore, that the novel cannot end, for investigation cannot do without sensation. It must always have it as a base and as raw material for its most subtle schemes. Under these conditions, Véry remarks, we are compelled to ask ourselves if the police are made for the world or the world for the police, a hypothesis by no means untenable since, in the first lines of Genesis, when the spirit of God moved on the waters, the writer is evidently referring to the police. This theology is neither so gratuitous nor so out of place as it appears. The detective story does represent the struggle between the element of organization and the element of turbulence whose perpetual rivalry balances the universe. In society it is symbolized by the antagonism of law and crime. That is why the detective and the murderer appear as the champions of two distinct principles towards which everyone feels in turn disposed: the one which counsels him to commit the infraction, the other which prevents him from doing it. In the same way, the individual tends alternately towards discipline and debauchery. He is tempted by his emotions, would like to experience new and even intenser ones, ready to be lost in their attractive multitude. But he likes also to show himself lord and master, to impose order and clarity. Again, the criminal and the investigator become symbolic.

They are always the living images of order and license, but they are at the same time personifications, the one of pleasure, defiance, and scandal, of unguarded and spontaneous movements; the other of the voluntary power which knows how to understand, to penetrate, and subdue them.

By its nature, the novel will illustrate this concern with darkness and license. In love, it prefers the side of passion whose requirements it finds admirable, against family institutions which it declares mean and stupid. There is no revolt which it does not support, no adventure, despair or enthusiasm which it does not encourage. It condemns neither the murderer nor the prostitute, has no prejudices against incest or adultery. Rather, it manifests towards them a spirit of kinship and thanks them for being passionate and irregular. One would think there existed a tacit understanding between the romantic and rebel forces of the human being. If it describes submission it is disgusted by it; if it paints insurrection, it invites one to it. It finds greatness only in excess and in solitude. As a novel, the detective story brings into play the greatest of crimes, murder. Similarly, it celebrates the wretch which society condemns the most severely: the murderer, one who has not hesitated by shedding blood to affect it completely in the person of one of its members. It is in this sense that it can pass for the clearest and the most shamelessly romantic of novels.

But as the solution of a problem and as an exercise of the intelligence, the detective story is on the contrary obliged to take as its hero the adversary chosen by error and crime, the so-called "representative of order," and make him simultaneously the born enemy of passion, of action and even of life, the perfect logician who composes with discontinuous elements a coherent world and who never engages in the turbulent dramas and mysteries which he contemplates and solves.

Thus anarchy is irremediably opposed to the police, and sensation to investigation. The detective story endeavors to combine them, however, and endlessly runs into the same obstacle: the contradiction between the idea of the police and the nature of the romantic. It attempts to be both abstract and sensational and

every detective story has the same ambiguity as the strangest of them all, *The Man Who Was Thursday*, by G. K. Chesterton, in which a detective succeeds in finding his way into the central committee of the universal anarchistic association. The seven members of this highest organism of terror and destruction know one another only by the names of one of the days of the week, and little by little all are revealed as policemen charged with investigating this harmful center, with the exception, however, of the supreme head, Sunday. When it comes to this man, each one describes him differently, but curiously, according to his own nature and by equating him with the universe. They recognize then that they are dealing with God.

The great revolutionist was therefore identical with the sovereign force of order and conservation. Is one to conclude that infraction, violence, murder, constitute only a gigantic phantasmagoria whose keeper delights in mixing the wires and foiling the illusions, but in which he takes care not to intervene and use his energy? Such is in fact the attitude of the detective, worldly, esthetic, detached, wanting neither money nor glory, who is neither shocked nor moved to pity and who, at the conclusion, washes his hands, like Pontius Pilate, of the consequences which the discoveries of his perspicacity in the low world of sensations, emotions, and sorrows, may have. He returns coldly to his games, to his musical instruments, and lets the trouble of men take its course. But others are needy and combatant, they want fortune, reputation, power; they go down into the arena and do things themselves. They are in no way disinterested, either materially or morally. They have a concept of love and honesty. They suffer and struggle more than they reason: they fight the world in which they move, oppose its outmoded system with authentic needs and new values. Here still the detective story faithfully reflects the attitudes which the individual takes with reference to society: Philo Vance turns away from it, despises it, while working to strengthen it; Perry Mason struggles in it and strives to purify it, but by encountering the profiteers who look upon themselves as its supporters. In this case, the detective story ceases to

be a mental game with no concrete material. It passes over into the novel, that is, it becomes a mirror of the reactions of man at the center of the collectivity in which his existence is involved. We are no longer dealing with a brain, insensible and unreal, but with a hero for whom it is possible to feel sympathy and whose sufferings and hopes one shares. And the story is then a detective story only because the police exist in the world.

[TRANSLATED BY WILLIAM JAY SMITH]

About the Contributors



☆ JACQUES BARZUN, a Professor of History at Columbia University, is the author of many books, and writes a regular column of criticism for *Harpers*. ☆ The French writer ROGER CAILLOIS edited *Lettres Françaises* in Buenos Aires during the war. He is the author of *Le Mythe et l'Homme*, *Le Roman Policier*, and other works. ☆ HECTOR HOPPIN is a writer now living in New York. ☆ The Spanish critic JOSE MONTESINOS has taught in Spain, Germany and France, and is now at the University of California in Berkeley. ☆ DONAT O'DONNELL is an Irish critic living in Dublin. An article of his appeared in a recent issue of *The Kenyon Review*. ☆ PATRICK QUENTIN, Q. PATRICK and JONATHAN STAGGE are well known for their many detective stories. ☆ A book of poems by WILLIAM JAY SMITH has just appeared, published by the Banyan Press. ☆ ROBERT STANGE, formerly a Little, Brown editor, is now doing free-lance writing. ☆ RUTHVEN TODD's book of critical essays, *Tracks in the Snow*, first published in England, has recently appeared in this country. He is at present living in New York.

Index to Volume V



- Barzun, Jacques: Requiescat (article) V, 4, p. 59
- Caillois, Roger: Order and License (article) V, 4, p. 67
- Dell, Stanley: A Comment on Santayana (article) V, 1, p. 41
- Deming, Barbara: The Playwright as Playwright (article) V, 1, p. 19
- Durrell, Lawrence: Four poems V, 2, p. 15
- English, Maurice: *Animal Farm*—Orwell (review) V, 1, p. 53
- Fergusson, Francis: *La Casa de Bernarda Alba*—Lorca (review) V, 2, p. 57
- Harrigan, Anthony: Poem V, 2, p. 2
- Hondius, J. M.: The Eranos Conferences (article) V, 3, p. 63
- Hoppin, Hector: Notes on Primitive Detection (article) V, 4, p. 39
- Howes, Barbara: *Little Treasury of Modern Poetry* (review) V, 1, p. 54
- *In Parenthesis*—D. Jones (review) V, 2, p. 60
- Jackson, James T.: Delta Cycle (article) V, 1, p. 3
- Johnson, W. R.: Poem V, 3, p. 45
- Jung, C. G.: Individual and Mass Psychology (article) V, 3, p. 3
- Kerényi, Karl: Mythology and the Novel (correspondence) V, 2, p. 3
- Mann, Thomas: Mythology and the Novel (correspondence) V, 2, p. 3
- Manning, Olivia: A Spot of Leave (story) V, 1, p. 31
- Holy Fire (article) V, 3, p. 37
- McElroy, Walter: *Man in the Divided Sea*—Merton (review) V, 2, p. 58
- *Lord Weary's Castle*—R. Lowell (review) V, 2, p. 58
- Mercier, Vivian: Austin Clarke (article) V, 3, p. 25
- Montesinos, José F.: Imperfect Myths (article) V, 4, p. 2
- Moravia, Alberto: The Island of Dreams (story) V, 3, p. 12
- Neruda, Pablo: Two poems V, 1, p. 15
- O'Donnell, Donat: Graham Greene (article) V, 4, p. 18
- Praz, Mario: Italian Literary Scene of Today (article) V, 2, p. 46
- Quentin, Patrick: Who'd Do It? (article) V, 4, p. 12
- Sjögren, Eric: Contemporary Literature: Sweden (article) V, 3, p. 55
- Smith, William Jay: Poem V, 3, p. 2
- Spence, Lewis: Poem V, 2, p. 44
- Stange, G. Robert: The Mystery of the Detective Story (article) V, 4, p. 31
- Stiles, George: A Short Way by Rail (story) V, 2, p. 31
- Strong, Joan: Terence Died (story) V, 3, p. 46
- Todd, Ruthven: A Trinity of 'Tecs (article) V, 4, p. 49
- Tompkins, Emily M.: Poem V, 1, p. 2
- Poem V, 3, p. 24